

# WOMEN, LAND OWNERSHIP AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE SUDAN

## Balghis Badri

*Malgré que les femmes soient les principales responsables de la production de la nourriture, il y a très peu d'entre elles qui possèdent des terres. De nouvelles lois favorisant les hommes, surtout à l'égard de l'enregistrement des terres et de la distribution des locataires ont fait qu'il est davantage difficile pour les femmes de devenir propriétaires. Balghis Badri, professeure en Sociologie à l'Université de Khartoum soutient que cette inégalité est, à la fin, un obstacle au développement, et résulte en une pénurie de nourriture. Badri présente une série d'études faites dans différentes régions du Soudan pour illustrer ses arguments.*

*Après une analyse des facteurs historiques, culturels et économiques qui ont créé cette situation, elle propose quelques stratégies importantes pour améliorer le statut des travailleuses du secteur agricole; celles-ci comprennent des réformes législatives, des modèles de cultivation et de production non-capitaliste plus convenables, l'accès au crédit, à la formation agricole, et aux services; et une plus grande participation des femmes dans la création des politiques affectant l'agriculture. De plus, les organisations de femmes peuvent jouer un rôle important dans l'obtention de ces réformes, et peuvent aider les femmes à acquérir un plus grand contrôle économique.*

Few Sudanese women are land owners, in spite of their significant participation in food production. New discriminatory legislation regarding land registration and tenancy distribution is making it even more difficult for women agricultural workers to improve their situation. This lack of land ownership has hampered development and led to shortages of food production.

In the Sudan women's participation in agriculture production amounts to 87% in the traditional sector (Khidir, 1981) of the non-market oriented economy. Their participation drops to 10% in the modern mechanized agricultural sector where traditional female employment activities have been transferred to men.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, there is not enough statistical data on land ownership nationwide. How-

ever, from the data included in some studies, we find that according to the 1973/74 census only 11.7% of the tenancies of the Gazira Scheme are owned by women; 3% of the white Nile Pump Schemes of Kasti; and 9% of that of Al Diem are owned by women.<sup>2</sup> In Kutum (Darfur) 10% of the land is owned by women; in the Rahed Scheme 3% are owned by women.<sup>3</sup>

I would like to draw attention to a few case studies that illustrate the following convictions:

- when women do not own land, their participation in cultivation is quite meager – particularly in schemes based on tenancy distribution;
- ownership of land motivates women to be more productive;
- general social acceptance of women's work will increase their participation in economic activity.

The first case is from Kutum in Western Sudan; it shows how legislation drastically lowers women's land ownership and is taken from an abstract of a study undertaken by A. Jalil and Umbada on "Rural Women in Small-Scale Irrigated Agriculture: The Case of Wadi Kutum" (1983).

Kutum lies in Western Sudan in Darfur region on a valley of the fertile Mara Mountain. The main activities are millet production and horticulture. Millet is cultivated during the rainy season by both women and men; fruits and vegetables are grown mainly by women in small plots on the banks of the water course mainly during the dry season.

The high economic participation of women (53% according to the 1973 census) is encouraged by a traditional acceptance of women's historic right to work. However, the present rate of participation, estimated to be 80%, has increased because of male migration, a response to the impoverished environment. 46.4% of the farms are owned by women. However, when the government introduced the system of farm registration, only 10% of the gardens were registered in women's names! The government

wanted to give credit and extension service to the farmers, as well as to encourage the formation of cooperatives; women considered that credits and cooperatives were part of the public domain and thus associated with men. Therefore they gave up their land rights to men, resulting in 90% of it now being formally registered in men's names, though it is the women who do the cultivation. Women are barred by custom from free interaction with foreign men, and so did not receive the extension services.<sup>4</sup>

The second case study is from the Northern region, which has an area of 477,000 sq. km., of which 7,000,000 acres are arable and about 57.5% is ready for immediate cultivation. Women farmers mainly cultivate in Basin and Sugias farms which constitute 3.8% of all cultivated land. They grow mainly dates and legumes. The Northern region has the lowest rate of female economic participation – 1.4%. There are five types of cultivation in the region according to land ownership: 1) public pump schemes making 25.2% of area cultivated (the labourers who work them are males); 2) 62% are private pump schemes, generally big schemes owned by the rich, and 25% of which are owned by one company; 3) another 9% is mitrat; 4) 3.6% basin cultivation; and 5) 0.2% are Sugias. The last two are small plots of land owned by families; the majority of women's participation and ownership is concentrated here.<sup>5</sup> Pump cultivation needs start-up capital to start. Credit facilities are not open to women. With the introduction of pump schemes in the early 1930s a noticeable retreat of women from cultivation took place. In the male-dominant Arab culture of the region, women are not encouraged to work, unless from necessity or when they are old. With the introduction of pump schemes, privacy of the family was not possible: this forced women to stay home. Thus both cultural and political factors resulted in a decreased participation of women in cultivation. Pump schemes became not only owned by men, but because they are a



**Amanitere, Queen of Meroe, Nubia, now Sudan. 25—41 AD**

Amanitere was an African Queen who ruled with her husband over a land called Meroe.

Meroe was known to have had many Queens as rulers. The Bible (Acts 8:27) and Roman historians refer to these Queens as "Candace" (Candace or 'Kdke' means 'Queen' in Meroe language).

This powerful and prosperous state existed for about 1000 years and was greatly influenced by Egyptian culture and religion. It declined and was conquered by Ethiopian Kings around 350 AD. It is believed that part of the Meroe people fled westwards and also into East Africa.

capitalist mode of production many farmers were changed into wage labourers—particularly recently, with the expansion of large scale pump schemes.

The migration of men from the region to the Gulf countries has left male-owned land without cultivation. Women rely on what their husbands send to them. The end result is a shortage in food production, a situation which the regional government attempts to remedy through large scale schemes.

It can be foreseen that if economic need forces women to work, then their option is as wage labourers in the big private schemes. The situation in the Gulf coun-

tries in the future years will force back many of the Sudanese men working in semi-skilled work. If regional policies were followed, then the males will return to their villages with, in most cases, no land to cultivate. They will then have to hire out their labour to the large scale schemes. The production pattern will change to a capitalist mode. However, if women were encouraged to cultivate by motivating them through a more equitable distribution of land, then husbands could return to their wife's land and cultivate with them. Such a remedy would ultimately raise women's status as property owners and will encourage them

to become economically active in a region where their participation is 2% approximately.

The third case is drawn from Nomadic tribes. This case shows how planners, assumptions that women's domain is primarily private has an adverse effect on development. Sudan owns 55 million head of livestock, is self-sufficient in red meat, and produces a considerable surplus for export. This sector contributes to 6.7% of Sudanese exports. Males are primarily responsible for the animals' watering and feed. They move with them in search of pasture and water. Women, on the other hand, are responsible for milking the herd, for milk processing and marketing.<sup>6</sup> Sudan spends about 11 million Sudanese pounds annually to import milk powder and milk products! Many reasons are behind this. Although about 13% of Sudanese revenue from exports derives from livestock, the whole of the nomadic sector is neglected by the government. The government has failed to invest in the animal milk sector—a sector which is monopolized by women.

I think that if policy makers had concentrated their efforts on helping women to construct woman-run dairy farms and on introducing only appropriate technology for milk processing, a better situation could have been achieved. However, the government policy makers attempted to solve the problem of milk shortage by importing milk and giving licenses to big companies to invest. Already some Arab companies have been established; they are operating in Khartoum province and are mainly dependent upon hired labour. Women's traditional work is being taken from them as these companies introduce advanced technologies which women do not know how to use. Any expansion along these lines means a loss to women.

The present situation of starvation compels us to take more notice of nomads in general and nomadic women in particular. Instead of introducing handicraft projects to nomadic women (the Sodari and Tinna projects), our priority should be given to milk in order to save ourselves millions of pounds annually and to better the situation of women—whom we should consider not as belonging to the private sector, but as part and parcel of the development plans.

The last case study is drawn from the modern sector of Irrigated schemes of the Gazira, Rahad, White Nile pump schemes

and Khartoum province. Irrigated large scale schemes in Sudan are based on the system of tenancy distribution: the majority of tenancies are distributed to males. Only 10% of females were considered economically active, compared to 49% of men in this sector. However, 85% of women participate in the traditional agricultural sector. According to the tenancy distribution rules, particularly those pertaining to the first two schemes, a head of a household should be given a tenancy provided that he will cultivate it, has a Sudanese National Certificate, and has a family that will help him. These rules ultimately exclude the majority of women. A head of a household, according to most planners, is automatically a man. Only widowed women could be head of households. The notion of family help is associated with the idea that it is a woman who should serve her husband and not the other way around. Having the Sudanese National Certificate is a difficult process which requires witnesses and obliges one to travel to main towns in order to obtain it. Both factors hinder women. Thus legislative and customary rules have hindered women's ownership to tenancies. Another complicating factor for women is that the complex new systems of irrigation and crop rotation used in the schemes means a full time job all day, all year round, which is not suitable for the majority of women who are mothers of young children.

The low participation of women in the tenancy activities of their husbands and others is due to the facts that the work is hard, tenancy is located far from their houses, and that husbands would rather lower production and profit by hiring labourers than letting their wives help them in front of other men in tedious work which the husbands themselves are forced to accept and do not highly value.<sup>7</sup> From the women's point of view, hired work in non-husband tenancies is not profitable, and they often have husbands who do not give them money. However, in the few cases where women work on their own tenancies they have excelled men in production (according to the 1983 records the prize for the best tenancy was won by a woman). In the White Nile Schemes the situation is a bit different: 50% of the wives of tenants work in their husband's tenancies, compared to 30% in the Gazira scheme. These tenancies are smaller, nearer to villages and the people



*Kenyan women at local market*

*Credit: Aura Bizzarri*

are poorer. All family members need to work as a team because any hired labour will cut the profit by half.<sup>8</sup>

From these cases it becomes clear that women's economic participation in agriculture is very significant, but their ownership of land is limited. Their participation increases when they own their land. Moreover, women make such calculations in terms of the input value of their work on themselves and their families; as such, they react to how much they should engage in agricultural activities. It is clear that property ownership in the form of land and its products is an important motivating factor.

Planners and policy makers have adhered to ideas about women, their needs and interests that have greatly affected the kind of laws and policies adopted – particularly those relating to the registration of land and the distribution of tenancies. When the British introduced the land law in 1925, the law was based on individual ownership. However, Sudanese customary law was based mainly on communal ownership of land. Land was known to be the property of the clan, lineage, sub-lineage and family units. The individualistic culture of Westerners – the male-dominated culture that sees women as reproducers and men as the breadwinners – has affected the kind of laws introduced by the colonizers. The educated Sudanese, influenced by what they have learned from the Western Culture, adopted the same laws and continued to have sexist laws. Moreover, the

Riverian tribes of Northern Sudan, influenced by the male-dominated Arab culture, and being as well the dominant tribes of Sudan from whom the majority of policy makers are drawn, continued on the same trend. Thus women logically withdrew from economic participation when land was withdrawn from them through the legislation systems. Women of Western Sudan continued to cultivate land because traditionally this is the role assigned to them, and because they were forced to feed themselves as men migrated to urban areas.

Thus discriminatory legislation, customary laws, misconceptions about women's roles and male dominance have affected women adversely, by depriving them of needed service in agriculture, by undermining their potential power as cultivators, by changing them into agricultural wage labourers, by undermining their right to land ownership, and by ignoring their needs for training and development. All these factors have led in the long run to continued underdevelopment and to the starvation of millions.

In order to remedy this situation, women's organizations must work collectively, by coordinating to help women directly and by acting as pressure groups to influence policy makers to consider women in land legislation and in fair distribution of services and training in development. Each organization should set a goal for itself to attain in the right direction. More case studies need to be collected; specific suggestions from grass



Lesotho women planting corn

Credit: Zimbabwe Women's Bureau

roots groups should be brought forward; and coordinating workshops conducted to draw up strategies for action.

In conclusion, I would like to propose the following reforms: Where women are already traditionally accepted as participants in agricultural production, extension and credit services should be extended to them. The female graduates of agricultural and family science colleges should produce appropriate educational material for the local female extensionists at the grass roots level.

- The land registration system should not be introduced into areas that traditionally recognize other ways of defining ownership.
- In order to ensure that all technical, financial, and agricultural services reach women, these services should be offered through women's organizations. Thus the growth of women's organizations is a necessity.
- Women's consciousness should be raised about their right to, and the importance of land ownership.

- Government policy makers should be obliged to recognize the adverse effect of land registration laws and tenancy rules on development.
- The ranks of policy makers should include many women.
- Women's organizations should act as pressure groups to lobby for changes in the distribution regulations pertaining to agricultural land.
- To encourage women's economic participation, we should have plans for small agricultural farms for food production owned by women. Women must be given all the needed encouragement to obtain access to training, capital and facilities.
- The expansion of the large scale agricultural schemes that entail large capital and thus debt, advanced technologies, cash crops and wage labour, should be stopped. We must fight for better models of cultivation that suit our cultures, abilities and situations.

Models that will ultimately raise women's participation, empower them and raise their status. Models that will feed us. The suggested model is a return to our traditional system with the introduction of appropriate village technologies in the traditional sector.

<sup>1</sup>Mahasin Khidir, "Women's Participation in Agricultural Activities in the Sudan," Unpublished Ph. D. Thesis, University of Khartoum, 1981.

<sup>2</sup>Khidir.

<sup>3</sup>Abdil Jalil, "Rural Women in Small-Scale Irrigated Agriculture," 1984.

<sup>4</sup>Ibrahim Foad, *Ecological Imbalance in the Republic of the Sudan* (1984).

<sup>5</sup>Figures taken from Khalid Afan, "On the Role of the Regions in National Development of Sudan," Development Studies and Research Centre (DSRC) Series Papers (1984).

<sup>6</sup>*The Economic Survey Year Book: 1982-83* (Ministry of Finance).

<sup>7</sup>Gassim Al Said, "Off-tenancy Activities of Tenants in the Rahad Scheme," Unpublished M. Sc. Thesis, 1983.

<sup>8</sup>Badri and Bashir, "Women, Education and Development," in *Proceedings on Population and Development in Sudan* (1982).

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## NOUVELLES D'AFRIQUE

Les rouses rafaes au pied des cavales  
Déferlent sur des ouragans de lumière  
fauve

Des feux de caravanes incendient  
l'horizon

La mère jasse de primitives symphonies  
Elle crache la fièvre, les ailes aux pieds, la  
sueur à la peau

Une goutte de lait tremblant au sein  
Larme d'opale sur la latérite embrasée  
Et la mère murmure de sombres  
mélopées

Avant l'efflorescence de mort dans le silence  
du Sahel

Le ventre de la terre devient tombeau  
Pendant que le jour tombe sur le dos des  
troupeaux

Lèvres sèches, regard en fusion  
C'était l'Afrique assoiffée . . .

**Nadia Ghalem**

Montréal, Québec