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Review article

Cushioning women against gender inequality through promoting indigenous chicken production in sub Saharan Africa

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ABSTRACT

Poultry sub sector is a privileged entry point for promoting gender equality. Gender inequalities in poultry and livestock activities are now more and more acknowledged by governments, scientists, and farmers in sub Saharan Africa. This is on the background that gender inequality has translated into loss of opportunities or potential gains on agricultural production and food security. This has been exacerbated by the fact that the progress in empowering women in agriculture and reducing gender inequality has been slow despite this realization. The paper presents an overview of the development of the indigenous chickens sector in sub Saharan Africa and its implication on addressing gender equality. The assumption is that despite the multitude of socio-economic constraints faced by women in agriculture they are capable of raising indigenous chickens for the welfare of their households, hence promoting indigenous chickens can give women a chance to control more income, reducing gender inequality. Achieving gender equality and women's empowerment is critical to the success of these development goals.

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1. Introduction

Indigenous chicken production systems offer the potential for introducing a wide range of wider socio-economic issues relating to women empowerment, including improved production methods, redistribution of intra-household tasks and responsibilities, family nutrition, processing of products, marketing, increasing household economy, sustainable environmental practices, etc.

Indigenous chickens can act as one of the subsidiaries for economic and social upliftment of rural women in developing countries. Gueye (1998) found that approximately 80 % of the chicken flocks in a number of African countries were owned and largely controlled by women. Chicken production is one of the few agricultural enterprises used to address gender issues in developing countries (Kitalyi, 1998; Dolberg and Peterson, 2000). Women, assisted in some cases by children, play a key role in poultry production, as they are the main owners and managers of family poultry (Dadheech and Vyas, 2014). Family poultry production represents an appropriate system to contribute to feeding the fast growing human populations and to provide income to poor small farmers, especially women (Gujit, 1994; Alders, 1996; Kitalyi and Mayer, 1998). Poultry keeping is largely the responsibility of women, but despite this, research into rural poultry development is usually narrowly focused on technical aspects with very little attention being paid to the wider socio-economic issues. Interventions to improve poultry production are often seen as a way to reach poor rural women to improve their livelihood (Rushton, 1998). Generally, men and women tend to own different animal species. In many societies, cattle and larger animals are usually owned by men, while smaller animals, such as goats and backyard poultry which are kept near the house, are more women's domain. However, ownership patterns of livestock are more complex and are strongly related to the livestock production system and to social and cultural factors. Targeting women, family-based poultry systems as an effective entry point for poverty alleviation and gender equality programs is gaining widespread acceptance by developmental agency.

2. The indigenous chickens perform a multitude of functions

Sonaiya (2003) defined village or indigenous chickens as involving any genetic stock, improved or unimproved, that was raised extensively or semi-intensively in relatively small numbers (usually less than 100 at a time). Indigenous chicken production systems are economically efficient because although the output from the individual bird is low, the inputs are usually lower (Tarwireyi and Fanadzo, 2013). In most communities in rural areas, indigenous chickens are important in breaking the vicious cycle of poverty, malnutrition and disease (Roberts, 1992). Subsistence farmers keep them for household production (meat and eggs) and/or to supplement their income. They are also considered one of the main sources of income for the rural poor (Swatson et al., 2001; 2004; Muchadeyi et al., 2005, 2007; Mtileni et al., 2009). Money from the sale of the birds is used to buy immediate household requirements such as food, dairy feeds and to pay school fees, among other purposes. Village chickens produce eggs for hatching, sale and home consumption, and birds for sale, healing ceremonies, traditional offerings, replacement, home consumption and for gifts to visitors and relatives (Mutisi and Kusina 1996; Tadelle 1996; Muchenje and Sibanda 1997). According to Sonaiya, (1997) indigenous chickens provide major opportunities for increased protein production and income for smallholders farmers, especially women. They have relatively low cost of production and they do not take long to mature.

There is considerably minimal investment on inputs with most of the inputs generated in the homestead; labour is inexpensive as it can be drawn from the family. Low-input indigenous chicken production is very popular amongst resource-limited rural communities, especially women in sub Saharan Africa (Mtileni et al., 2009). Indigenous chicken production systems are economically efficient because although the output from the individual bird is low, the inputs are usually lower. They also have short generation interval and high prolificacy, however low production potential in both meat and egg yield. Women can keep a chicken that can produce sufficient meat and eggs, become broody and hatch their own chickens to make the owner independent in egg and white meat production (Grobelaar et al., 2010). As a result of this, the indigenous chickens have been recommended as a good alternative source of cheap, high quality animal protein that suits escalating human population. Indigenous chickens play many socio-economic roles in traditional religious and other customs, as gift payments and serve as an important source of animal protein (McAinsh et al., 2004). They can also be transported with ease to different areas and are relatively affordable and consumed by the rural people as compared with other farm animals such as cattle and small ruminants. But most times, indigenous chicken keeping has been reported to be a secondary

enterprise and represents some proportion for the income earned by households, most especially women. According to Nhleko et al. (2003), village chickens are among the most adaptable domestic animals that can survive cold and heat, wet and drought, sheltered in cages, unsheltered outside or roosting in trees. Indigenous chickens adapt well to different environments and can survive on limited feed resources that fluctuate in quality according to seasons (Kingori et al., 2007). Indigenous chickens also play a complementary role in relation to other crop-livestock activities. They have of a major benefit because chickens are good scavengers as well as foragers and have high levels of disease tolerance, possess good maternal qualities and are adapted to harsh conditions and poor quality feeds as compared to the exotic breeds. By eating leftovers from the kitchen and insects such as cockroaches, birds perform a valuable sanitary function in villages. Poultry manure can be used as field manure or as feed supplement for ruminants.

3. Gender differentiated roles and implications for gender equality in indigenous chicken production

The role of indigenous chickens in gender equality emanate from the fact that agricultural interventions on women and vice versa depend on gender differences in terms of roles and responsibilities in household and community, ownership and control over livestock species, access to livestock extension services and decision-making about use of inputs and outputs in livestock production. However, the extent to which persons of the opposite sex will assume the responsibilities of the other in livestock and poultry depend not only on labour shortages but also on the nature of the task, and the intensity with which people adhere to role ideals. In animal production, as in other agricultural sectors, men and women usually have distinct roles in managing animals. Commonly, men own cattle, buffalo and other large animals, using them to work the fields. But women often do most of the work of feeding, caring and milking these animals. In addition, women frequently have sole responsibility for raising smaller, short-cycled animals, such as goats, pigs and poultry. Women also take a leading role in breeding livestock, often maintaining and strengthening traditional breeds that are threatened by extinction. As food producers, rural women have a stake in poultry and livestock production and this stake depends on such factors as the division of labour between women and men in using and managing resources, and the access to and control over those. In Kenya, Roberts (1996) observed that women, young males between 6 – 15 years and the elderly (above 65) spend considerable time engaged in livestock activities. Unlike with large animals, women are reported to have more control and decision making powers on chickens (Pedersen, 2002). Muchadeyi et al. (2004) observed that the proportion of chickens owned by women and children in Zimbabwe was higher than for any other livestock species. Aboe et al. (2006) observed a significant effect of sex of household head on chicken flock sizes, management practices and uses in Ghana. Ngo Thim et al., (2006) and Gondwe (2004) made similar observations in village chicken production systems of Vietnam and Malawi respectively.

4. Promoting indigenous chickens as a tool for women empowerment and its rationale

The rationale for an engendered livestock policy to embrace small-holder poultry production is logical as it leads to much greater outreach to the mostly disadvantaged women in poorest communities. Smallholder poultry production because the units are small will not generate a huge income. However it represents a known skill to most poor women and can help them into a positive spiral of events that may move people out of poverty (Jensen and Dolberg, 2003). Indigenous chickens provide major opportunities for increased protein production and incomes for female headed households because of the following factors: small generation interval, the high rate of productivity, the ease with which poultry products can be supplied to different areas, the ease with which poultry products can be sold due to their relatively low economic values, minimal association of poultry with religious taboos, and the complementary role poultry play in relation to other crop-livestock activities. Women can be brought out of their isolation and thereby increase their social-capital by participating in a poultry programme - a point that has frequently been made by women in evaluation and impact studies (Darudec, 2003). Indigenous chicken production supported by marketing infrastructure can contribute tribute to women livelihoods, in terms of food and cash, and as a buffer stock, and that appropriate, often minor changes in technical and institutional dimensions generate handsome returns. The small size per household in most rural areas seems to be the limit that can be kept by a women without special inputs in terms of feeding, housing and labour. These small flocks scavenge sufficient feed in the surroundings of the homestead to survive and to reproduce. In the event that flock size increases women may be trained in supplementary feeding to provide a balanced ration, because any

significant increase in flock size often leads to malnutrition if no feed supplement is provided. Feed is an input of major concern in village chicken and the supply of adequate feed supplement can improve production. The nutrient intake of scavenging birds varies from place to place according to the seasons, the crops grown and the natural vegetation available. Feeding of backyard poultry is a good example of the recycling of household and farm wastes, and the use of naturally occurring resources. Women devise innovative ways of using waste products. Grain and grain by-products are usually offered as supplements to the birds.

5. Building the capacity of women in managing indigenous chickens through gender sensitive policy, training and provision of appropriate resources.

The women stress that the benefit is not only the money they earn, but that they get basic skills in running an enterprise and opportunities to meet other women through regular group sessions for training or credit collection. Most women experienced tremendous difficulties in raising indigenous chickens due to lack of extension services, which mainly target other livestock species. There is notable lack of the required husbandry skills, training and opportunity to improve upon their household indigenous chicken production sustainably. It is therefore recommended that government extension departments could design and implement a research and training program aimed at building the capacity of women in managing indigenous chickens. The dominance of women in smallholder farming, and production of indigenous chickens in particular, is a common characteristic in sub-Saharan Africa (Guèye, 2000; Sonaiya, 2005; Doss, 2011; FAO, 2011; Halima et al., 2007). Despite this, extension provision in developing countries remains low for both women and men, and women tend to make less use than men of extension services (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2010). There is therefore a need to design training programs in indigenous chickens that specifically target women who are the main players. Apart from training and management of indigenous chickens, there are many constraints to promote women in indigenous chicken production that need to be addressed. These comprise disease control, protection against various predators, better feeding, genetic improvements, marketing, access to production inputs, infrastructure and capital, farmer organization, and, foremost conducive institutions and governmental policies. However, addressing any one or several of these constraints without attention to all will do little to improve the situation (Permin, et al., 2000). Access to and control over land concern both rural women and rural men, although women are at a disadvantage, mainly because of customary practices and laws that limit their access to resources. Without secure land rights, farmers have little or no access to credit, rural organizations and other agricultural inputs and services.

Lack of any other agricultural activity, ensuring gender sensitive policies, equitable resource allocation and training in supporting indigenous chicken production will improve productivity. Gender responsive policies facilitate change process for ending gender discrimination and securing women's access to key productive resources. The assumption is that without specific attention to gender equality, unknowingly policy may reinforce inequalities between women and men, and may even increase productive resources imbalances. Therefore it is critical that addressing gender differentiated productive resources imbalances and development of engendered policies is an integral part of enabling women to guarantee their families'—and their own—well-being. Gender differentiated inequality in the distribution of resources is linked with indigenous chickens production inefficiency, however, interventions meant for promoting poultry production in general production often overlook to redress women's lack of access to, and control of, important productive resources. This has been exacerbated by non engendered policies, where decentralized administrative and institutional capacities and public awareness campaigns do not need to assert, protect and enhance women's rights to productive resources, land and property. Not much consideration has been paid to differentiated productive resources imbalances and development of gender sensitive policies on livestock in general, or to which delivery mechanisms may be more effective in addressing women needs and concerns in poultry production. It is assumed that traditional agricultural intervention programs on both poultry and livestock are not gender-responsive and typically do not consult women who are the majority end-users, indigenous chickens are always left out in most programs. Policies should be made to support efforts to strengthen governmental capacities and legal frameworks to guarantee women full legal rights to own property and to inherit as a critical issue for the economic empowerment of women. Women's low participation in national and regional policy-making, their invisibility in national statistics and their low participation in extension services has meant that those issues of most concern to women such as indigenous chickens do not receive adequate attention in the design and implementation of many development policies and programs. Establishment of gender sensitive policies have far more reaching implications for addressing the main

concerns of women by paying attention to indigenous chicken productive role of women. This can only be achieved involving women in policy making decision or by directly consulting them to articulate their needs. However, policy makers should be aware that development and implementation of gender responsive policies and equitable gender resource allocation are likely to be mistaken for violation of social norms or adversely affect gender relations within the household, leading to less successful adoption and potential backlash against women. Thus, interventions that seek to remove obstacles in gender resource allocation need to consider the trade-offs inherent in challenging and respecting gender norms.

6. Implications

There is enormous potential of empowering women through indigenous chicken production in order to provide household income and to include much essential nutrients in low cost daily food. Indigenous chickens makes a significant contribution to the livelihoods of the poor and offers substantial scope for expansion to alleviate poverty especially in women headed households. Village chickens as the technological intervention, can be targeted to reach poor women and help female headed households to increase their food security, reduce their vulnerability and start a process that will move them out of poverty. Efforts should be directed towards improving indigenous chicken productivity through adequate Nutrition from locally available feed resources, women training in improved health and management. Indigenous breeds development specifically through and/or cross – breeding with superior exotic breeds might improve production. The indigenous chickens are not only a source of animal protein, it also serves as an investment alternative and source of additional income especially for women in the rural areas. To boost the indigenous chickens performance, there is need to train women on improved management, management issues which has the advantage of reducing disease incidence and mortality rates are therefore critical. Prompt disease control measures will improve overall productivity of indigenous chicken production. It is undisputable that indigenous chickens keeping offers women among other benefits a readily available income and serves as a sources of high quality animal protein for households in addition to it socio-economic values and gender equality. Hence, there is urgent need to develop and implement chicken intervention programs as a tool to address gender equality in poor communities. The resultant effect of higher indigenous chicken productivity at the household level can be seen in enhanced income and improved living standards of the women and their household as well as increased animal protein. Women still often overlooked in agricultural interventions programs deprive women of traditional realms of responsibility and social recognition, prevent women from benefiting equitably from development constrain women from fulfilling their potential to contribute to agricultural development and on individual household welfare. In the face of increasingly volatile agricultural conditions, due to the impacts of climate change for example, it is important that the rural poor and particularly women are equipped with the skills to cope and adapt to ensure food security and improve income levels. Investing in gender equality and women's empowerment can unlock human potential on a transformational scale, however this should be supported by gender sensitive policy, training and provision of appropriate resources to women. There is a need for marketing linkage, extension and training for women which would be useful in improving productivity and household income. Long term gender promotion through indigenous chicken production interventions lead to sustainable development and poverty alleviation in most poor communities in sub Saharan Africa.

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