

GENDER IMBALANCE IN THE COCOA SECTOR IN KAILAHUN DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

The cocoa sector in Kailahun District is an integral part of the local and national economy of Sierra Leone. It provides livelihood for many households. However, gender imbalance persistently limits the full participation of women in cocoa farming and its related activities. This study examines the socio-economic and cultural factors that contribute to gender imbalance in the sector. The research employs a mixed-methods approach using questionnaire, interviews, observation and secondary data. Findings indicate that women envisage male dominance, fettered access to financial resources, land tenure insecurity, low remuneration for similar work done on cocoa farms for which men are better paid and underrepresentation in decision-making processes in the cocoa sector. The study concludes with recommendations to promote gender equity including policy interventions, capacity-building programmes, financial inclusion strategies, recruitment of female extension workers to motivate women to participate more actively in cocoa farming and the adoption of technologies that reduce women's domestic burden so that they have more time in cocoa farming and its related activities.

Keywords: Cocoa sector, economic empowerment, gender imbalance, Kailahun District,

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Kailahun District is in Eastern Sierra Leone. The district is known for its agricultural wealth, especially cocoa farming. Women play a significant role in the cocoa value chain from cultivation to marketing. However, their participation in the sector is constrained by a range of socio-cultural and economic barriers.

Gender imbalance in the sector affects women's livelihoods having wider implications for household incomes, economic growth, and food security. This study explores the factors contributing to gender imbalance in the cocoa sector in Kailahun District and suggests possible solutions for combatting the imbalance in the sector, the district and beyond.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Current literature on gender imbalance in agriculture highlights various constraints that women face, including limited access to land, financial services, and extension support (FAO, 2021).

Studies on cocoa farming in West Africa disclose that women's contribution to the cocoa sector is huge even though they often lack ownership of cocoa farms and are excluded from major decision-making processes (Barrientos, 2014). In addition, socio-cultural standards still reinforce male dominance in agricultural leadership (Quisumbing & Pandolfelli, 2010). This research builds on these insights by critically examining the case of Kailahun District.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach. Primary data was collected through questionnaires with 1000 cocoa farmers (632 male farmers and 378 female farmers) drawn from eight chiefdoms in the district as shown in the table below.

Table 1: Sex of Cocoa Farmers in the study area

Sex	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Male	622	62.2
Female	378	37.8
Total	1000	100.0

Source: Collected, 2019.

Key informant interviews with key stakeholders, including staff of the Ministry of Agriculture, cocoa dealers, staff of non-governmental organisations, and focus group discussion involving the cocoa farmers themselves in their respective age groups (youth aged 18-35, adult aged 36-55 and the aged from 56 above) and by sex were conducted to enhance unhindered response. Data collected by the administration of questionnaires was complemented by the other instruments in order to clarify issues identified in the questionnaires that needed to be clarified.

Table 2: Age of Cocoa Farmers in the Study Area

Age	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Youth (18-35yrs)	346	34.6
Adult (36-55yrs)	455	45.5
Aged (56yrs and above)	199	19.9
Total	1000	100.0

Source: Data collected, 2019

Secondary data was drawn from government reports, NGOs, and academic sources. Data analysis involved both qualitative thematic analysis and quantitative statistical techniques to identify trends and patterns.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Structural Barriers: One of the major imbalances women face in cocoa farming is land tenure insecurity. Customary land ownership systems in Kailahun District often favour men and make it difficult for women to obtain or become heir to land. Without secure land tenure which is required as a collateral, financial institutions find it extremely difficult to give loans

to women especially that recent experience has shown that they abscond when they realize that they cannot pay back loans they obtain from the institutions. This is how some financial institutions operating in the district have lost huge chunks of their operating capital with the debtors absconding to neighbouring Liberia or Guinea.

4.2. Economic Constraints: As already indicated, women in cocoa farming have inadequate access to financial resources, including loans, grants, and farming inputs. Microfinance initiatives targeting women remain scarce, and the cost of agricultural inputs including labour far exceeds their financial capabilities. These contrast with the situation of male cocoa farmers who are better placed when it comes to access to economic resources including land which they can use to acquire loans should the need arise.

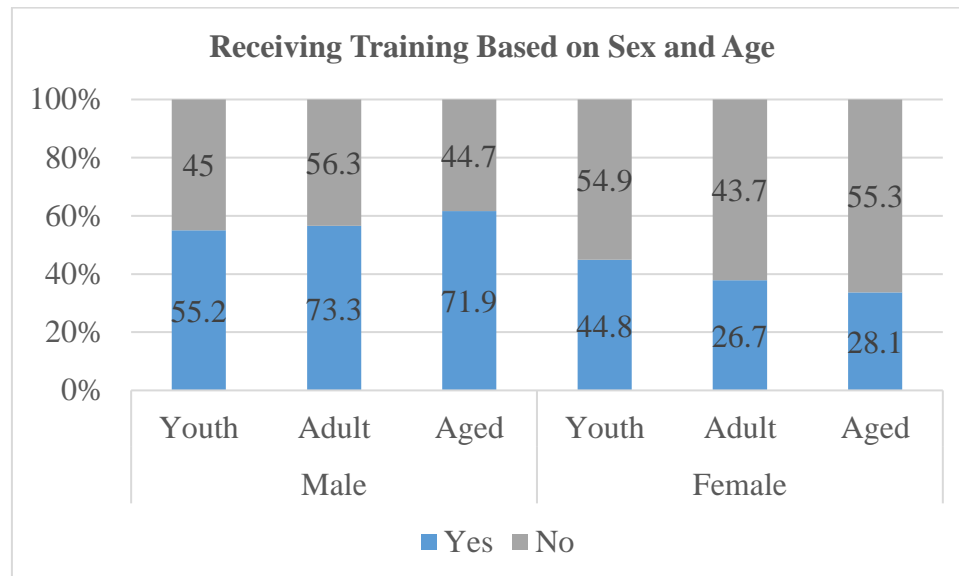
4.3. Socio-Cultural Factors: Traditional gender standards continue to hinder women's leadership roles in the cocoa sector. In many cases, women perform laborious tasks on cocoa farms but are seldom involved in market negotiations and decision-making processes involving the use of proceeds from the sale of cocoa beans. One of the heartbreaking experiences some women have in the past had is that when they had had bumper cocoa harvests, their husbands had added to the number of wives sometimes by marrying young girls without their consent. Women in such instances have been left disillusioned and demotivated to offer their best to boost the sector. They therefore display their resentment by being lethargic about the work and or sometimes taking away the pods, wet beans to be processed or dry beans to be sold and proceeds put to their own use.

Cultural standards in Kailahun District also put a married man's decision supreme over his wife's. As such, there have been instances when men have prevented their wives from participating in training opportunities because of jealousy. Such men accuse their wives of wanting to engage in extramarital activities especially if training programmes are organised outside their localities.

4.4. Policy and Institutional Gaps: Although national agricultural policies like the 2022 Customary Land Rights Act recognize gender equity, there are implementation gaps. A good number of women especially in rural communities where cocoa farming is a major livelihood activity lack awareness of available government programmes, and there is inadequate institutional support for the participation of women in the cocoa value chain.

4.5. Limited Access to Farmer support services: Cocoa farmers receive various support services including training, food for work, tools and the like to boost their farming activities (Moinina et al., 2023). However, it is clearly evident that men receive most of the support because they dominate the sector.

The figure (i) below shows those who (between male and female cocoa farmers) received more support.



Source: Data collected, 2019.

The figure shows that among the three age groups of cocoa farmers in the district, more male cocoa farmers than their female counterparts received support from the various sources being government of Sierra Leone through the Ministry of Agriculture, non-governmental organizations and cocoa dealers.

4.6. Increased workload: Women are overburdened by domestic chores including food processing and preparation, child care and care for the sick and aged. In the face of these, women sometimes find it very difficult if not impossible to actively participate in activities that boost their knowledge and skills in cocoa farming.

5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

To address gender imbalance in the cocoa sector in Kailahun District, the following strategies are suggested:

Land Policy Reforms: One way to correct gender imbalance in the cocoa sector in Kailahun District is by strengthening land reforms. The Customary Land Rights Act of 2022 which gives men and women equal access to land should be popularized instead of leaving it to gather dust on the shelves.

Financial Inclusion: Female cocoa farmer's access to credit and other financial services in the district should be expanded. If women have unfettered access to land, it can be used as collateral to secure loans from financial institutions just like their male counterparts do.

Capacity Building: Female cocoa farmers should be exposed to more training opportunities on modern cocoa farming techniques, leadership, and business management. This will broaden their knowledge and skills in cocoa farming.

Strengthen Women's Cooperatives: It is said that "It is loneliness that reduces the worth of a snake". Female cocoa farmers should be encouraged to form and lead cooperatives to enhance their market access and collective bargaining power.

Policy Implementation: Government and NGO efforts should be enhanced to enforce gender-inclusive policies in the agricultural sector.

Introduction of technologies that reduce women's workload: As indicated above, women sometimes find it difficult to fully participate in some cocoa related activities because they are overburdened by domestic chores. In that regard, technologies that reduce their workload such as installation of water gravity systems, bore holes with hand pumps, rice mills, and cassava leaf grating machines and so on should be provided in rural communities. These technologies can cut down on the time women take to work and be left with more time to engage in cocoa farming and its related activities.

Organising Training Programmes in the Localities of the Beneficiaries: Training opportunities should where possible be hosted in the communities where beneficiaries especially women reside to ward off the excuse of men preventing their wives from participating on the grounds that they may engage in extramarital activities or having young children that they can neither leave behind nor take along with them to training because of lack of individuals who can help to care for the children while training progresses.

6.0 CONCLUSION

Gender imbalance in the cocoa sector in Kailahun District propelled by structural, economic, and cultural factors persists. Divergent approaches involving policy reforms, financial inclusion, community engagement, introduction of technologies that reduce women's workload, organisation of training programmes in the localities of the beneficiaries where feasible and the recruitment of female extension personnel to motivate their peers should be carefully considered. Ensuring women's active participation in the cocoa sector will improve gender equity and contribute to economic growth and poverty reduction in the District and the country at large.

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