Female Students’ Participation in the University Mid-Career Agricultural Extension Training Programme in West Africa: Constraints and Challenges

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Abstract

Many studies in Africa indicate that the poor achievement of the continent’s agricultural targets in terms of efficiency, sustainability and equity is largely due to the predominant practice of directing training and resources to men only. The SAFE training programme set up in Universities for mid career agricultural extension staff of the ministry of Agriculture has only recorded 21% female participation so far. Some of the issues highlighted in relation to the importance of mid career training for women professionals in the field of Agricultural extension include: the need for policy shift in favour of women to enable research and extension to focus more on women; low educational level of most women; inability of women to rise up to decision making positions; need for role models within the agricultural extension service system; mid-career women in agricultural extension service need to improve their skills and competence; and mid-career women need education and training to reduce the influence of culture and religion on their attitudes. Analysis of the major challenges to women participation in the mid career training programme of the three universities also indicated the following: limited scholarship opportunities that target professional women; family problems; communities’ low perception of women’s talent and potential; limited access to information on opportunities for further education; lack of implementation of the various Governments’ Affirmative Action; the perception of agriculture as a domain of men; and socio-cultural/religious barriers. Among the recommendations for improved women participation in the mid-career agricultural extension training programme were: putting in place admission policies that ensure at least 25 % of set places for female extension agents; instituting a scholarship scheme for female mid-career students; setting up of policies to employ more female agricultural extension worker as well put up other types of mid career programme more suited to professionals like the sandwich and the distance learning programmes.

Key Words: Mid-career professionals; female students; participation; challenges; Mid career training programme.
Introduction and problem

Recent reports in Africa show that the productivity of agriculture on the continent has not satisfied the requirement for food fibre and other raw materials despite efforts by governments to develop agriculture. Many studies in Africa show that the poor achievement of the agricultural goals on the continent in terms of efficiency, sustainability and equity is due to the predominant practice of directing training and resources towards men only (World Bank, 2001). This realization has brought about a growing concern about gender issues in recent times. There is wide spread recognition of the need to improve both agricultural education and extension work with rural women. This is necessary as both a fundamental right and as a matter of good sense. As a cost-benefit analysis by the World Bank showed, investing in the education of females has the highest rate of return of any possible type of investment in developing countries (World Bank Report, 1995).

In the case of agricultural extension, a major problem is that in many of the courses of study at schools and colleges of agriculture, and in the in-service training extension workers receive after graduation, there is insufficient examination and discussion of the roles of rural women in agricultural production and rural development. Too little resource, if any, is devoted to gender analysis and addressing the question of how extension work can be carried out effectively with rural women. Another major problem is that in many countries there are too few women professionals trained in agriculture and especially Agricultural Extension. A 1991 FAO Expert Consultation on "Strategy Options for Higher Education in Agriculture" urged that special efforts be made to recruit and support female students who could become extension agents, agricultural researchers, instructors and policy makers. A wide range of factors, many of them deeply embedded in the gendered nature of culture and society, prevent women from participating in formal agricultural education and non-formal extension training. The unequal educational opportunity for women results in the unequal participation of women in the employment market.

As a means of strengthening the capacities of universities and colleges in SSA to develop responsive training programs to meet the need of both male and female agricultural extension staff that work with farmers and farmers groups (both within the public and private sectors), Sasakawa Africa Association (SAA), a Japanese NGO registered in Geneva, Switzerland, launched the Sasakawa Africa Fund for Extension Education (SAFE) in 1991. The SAFE initiative has expanded from one modest pilot program in Ghana in 1993 to 14 fully established programs in 2005 spread across nine African institutions of higher agricultural education that are offering responsive undergraduate and diploma training programmes in Agricultural Extension. It is therefore the aim of this study to ascertain the extent to which female agricultural extension staff participate in the mid career agricultural extension training programme of universities of Cape coast Ghana (UCC), Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Nigeria and Institute of rural polytechnic & applied research (IPR/IFRA), Mali. Specifically, the study would:

- Present the socio-demographic characteristics of women in the mid career training programme in three universities in West Africa.
- Analyse the importance of women’s participation in the Mid career agricultural extension training programme in the three universities in West Africa
- Present the trends of women participation in mid-career training programme in the three universities
- Analyse constraints & challenges to women participation in the mid career training programme of the three universities
Make recommendations for improved women participation in the mid career agricultural extension training programme.

Literature

African agriculture and women. The greatest challenge to Africa’s agricultural sector is to increase production and the value of agricultural products. As the amount of arable land available is limited, such an increase will have to be based both on intensification of farming as well as on adding value to products. Women are at the forefront of meeting this challenge, as agricultural production is primarily their domain, accounting for 70% of agricultural labour, responsible for 60% of agricultural production and 80% of food production in Africa (Kabeer, 1994). There is increased recognition of the relevance of gender in development work in Sahelian Africa. Country case studies throughout the Sahel and most parts of Africa – and emerging macroeconomic analysis – consistently show that gender based inequality acts as a constraint to growth and poverty reduction. They point to patterns of disadvantage women face, compared to men, in accessing the basic assets and resources needed to participate fully in realizing growth potential (World Bank, 1995). Africa is losing out on the potential of more than half its effective workforce. Measures to improve gender equality in Africa, in addition to their social and distributional implications, have considerable potential to accelerate growth and poverty reduction. It is important to note the participation of women and the role they play at national level as leaders and decision makers in the agricultural sector. Although significant changes have occurred in the agricultural sector over the past 20 years, especially in the role played by women and in the understanding of this role, the continued absence of appropriate policy and programme strategies on women means that their contribution to agriculture remains relatively invisible (World Bank, 1990). This persistent failure to recognise and account for the value of women’s knowledge and labour in the agricultural sphere, and to integrate the reality of women’s situation into development policies and programmes, is vital in the global economic development environment.

Professional women, gender and inequality. Professional women still face discrimination, and the “glass ceiling” phenomenon still very much in existence in many parts of the world. Stead, 1985; Hunsaker & Hunsaker, 1986; Gupta, Koshal, & Koshal, 1998 observed that stereotypic attitudes towards women’s abilities to lead and succeed in business organizations exist. In China, an emerging global economic giant, majority of male managers believe that, “the managerial success of women is constrained by their lack of dedication to pursuing a career with minimal commitment to the employing organization, insufficient experience, little interest in managerial roles and the lack of proper education” (Leon & Ho, 1994). Studies also show that male managers perceive women as lacking leadership qualities or possessing inferior leadership traits. As a result many men feel uncomfortable working under female leaders (Sostella & Young, 1991; Leon & Ho, 1994; Lau & Kaun, 1998). Gender inequality issue is nothing new, neither is literature on it. Both paid and unpaid forms of work consistently exhibit patterns of inequality. Analyses illustrate the way jobs are immutably assigned to one sex or the other ((Rhyne & Sharon, 1993). However, the Corporate Culture debate asserted that only men were considered to be affected by changes in employment practices. Only men were considered breadwinners, with women’s role limited to supplement income - wars aside ((Leon, 1994).
**Sasakawa Africa Fund for Extension Education (SAFE) training programme.** Most studies that have been conducted on the competence of agricultural extension services in SSA consistently indicate that their workers lack the necessary skills to effectively perform their duties (Zinnah, M et al. 2001). Other emerging challenges have compounded the problems of their responsibilities. These challenges include: (i) globalization and integration of markets, (ii) knowledge explosion and information management, (iii) demand from stakeholders – especially donors – to show impact amidst the downward funding for training of extension staff when compared with their research counterparts, and (iv) criticisms of top-down agricultural extension approaches.

As a means of strengthening the capacities of universities and colleges in SSA to develop responsive training programs to meet the need of both male and female agricultural extension staff that work with farmers and farmers groups (both within the public and private sectors), Sasakawa Africa Association (SAA), a Japanese NGO registered in Geneva, Switzerland, launched the Sasakawa Africa Fund for Extension Education (SAFE) in 1991. The SAFE initiative has expanded from one modest pilot program in Ghana in 1993 to 14 fully established programs in 2005 spread across nine African institutions of higher agricultural education that are offering responsive undergraduate and diploma training programmes in Agricultural Extension. The mission of agricultural education in Africa in the 21st Century is to work toward improved, relevant, and effective teaching, research, and extension. To achieve food security for all, education in agriculture must prepare a critical mass of dedicated, well-trained men and women who are committed to achieving socio-economic changes for Africa.

**Methodology**

The main objectives of this study are to ascertain the extent to which mid-career female agricultural extension staff participate in the SAFE programme as well as analyse the problems and constraints limiting their participation.

**Data Collection, Sampling & Analysis**

The data for this study was collected mainly from secondary and primary sources. The secondary data was collected from the academic records from the three universities. These records provided information on the admissions and graduation of mid-career students. The primary data sources were all female students currently involved in the mid-career training programme in the three countries, 12 lecturers each of the Universities of Mali/Cape Coast/ABU teaching the technical courses, and 15 female graduates of the mid-career training programme from the three countries. All current female participants in the programme implementation are included in the study for richness of information and representation. Questionnaires were designed for students, graduates and university lecturers and the data collected analysed with simple statistical tools from the SPSS package such as: frequency counts, means and standard deviation.

**Findings**

_Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Women in the Mid-Career Training Programme in Three Universities in West Africa_

**Age.** The mean age of female students currently in the training programme in the University of Cape Coast was 42 years, Ahmadu Bello University, 39.5 years and IPR/IFRA 40 years of age. This could be explained by the fact that all the female students were professionals...
with a minimum of 5 years of professional experience. There was no female student above 50 years of age as this was consider too old for amortization of their training by their employers and their academic ability in class.

Table 1  
*The Age Distribution of Current Female Students in the Three Universities (N= 41)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age categories</th>
<th>ABU</th>
<th>UCC</th>
<th>IPR/IFRA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;30</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>57.1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>42.9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;50</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>39.5</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>42.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure. The distribution of female student by religion

*Religion of female students in the three Universities:* In the University of Cape Coast Ghana, all of the female participants were Christians but in Ahmadu Bello University and IPR/IFRA, Mali, all of the female students were Muslims. The dominant religion in Mali and the Northern part of Nigeria where ABU is situated is the Islamic religion. This explains why all the female students from these two institutions were Muslims. According to Diarra (2004), the Islamic religion dominates in Mali.

*Marital status of female students across the three institutions.*

All current female participants were married in the University of Cape Coast Ghana while in Ahmadu Bello University, Nigeria and IPR/IFRA, Mali, majority of the female participants were married; a few were divorced. All of these female students claimed that being in their mid career & in their middle ages,
the African society expects them to be married and fully settled down. The few that were divorced claimed that they still hope to remarry after their studies.

Position of female students as wives. All the female students in UCC (100%) are all first wives of their husbands. This could be explained by their Christian religion with the biblical injunction that stresses one wife one husband. Female students from ABU and IPR/IFRA lay claim to their Muslim religion that allows them to be married as second, third and even fourth wives.

Figure 3. The distribution of female student according to the position as wives

Importance of Female Participation in the Mid Career Training Programme by Respondents from the Three Institutions

The three categories of respondents (current students, graduates and lecturers) agreed that women’s participation in the mid-career agricultural extension training programme is very important. Among the reasons given were: Rural urban exodus of men leaving agriculture in the hands of women with means of 3.93 for current female students, 3.54 for female graduates and 3.66 for lecturers. These rural women engaged in agriculture need qualified women professionals to cater for their needs as well as defend their views in agricultural development programmes. All the respondents also agreed (with means 3.93, 3.68, 3.67) that there is need for a policy shift in favour of women to enable research and extension to focus more on them and this demands that more women are trained at the University level to enable them occupy policy making positions within the agricultural extension system.

The three categories of respondents also agreed on the need for training of mid-career women due to the low educational level of most women. They claimed that compared to men within the Ministry of Agriculture in the three countries, fewer women have university training or degrees. The socio-cultural setting in which women operate in a country like Mali and the northern part of Nigeria as well as the perceptions of women about agriculture present some impediments to women. In Mali for instance, local culture and beliefs deprive the female child rights to education as preference is given to the male child with female children sent into early marriages. The life of a female child in Mali is largely regulated by traditional norms and values. One traditional norm is the strict gender based division of labor. While a man typically generates income for the family outside the household, a woman is expected to take care of domestic responsibilities which include meal preparation, cleaning, childcare and a host of other domestic duties within the extended family setting. Since these tasks do not directly generate income, a woman must thus depend on a man, whether it is her father, husband, or son, throughout her entire life for economic support (Diarra,2004). Another traditional norm that
influences a woman’s life in Mali is the institution of purdah, an Islamic custom that limits the visibility and mobility of a woman outside the home.

Table 2

*The Importance of Female Participation in the Mid Career Training Programme by Respondents from the Three Institution*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Current female students Mean</th>
<th>Female Graduates Mean</th>
<th>lecturers Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rural urban exodus (especially of the male labour force)</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>3.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing participation of women in agriculture in the rural areas</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>3.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for policy shift in favour of women to enable research &amp; extension to focus more on them</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>3.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low educational level of women within the agricultural extension system compared to their male colleagues</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>3.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inability of the majority of women to rise up to decision making positions</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>3.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for role models within agricultural extension service system</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>3.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The need for mid career women in agricultural extension service system to improve their skills and competence</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>3.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid career women’s need for education and training to reduce the influence of culture and religion on their attitudes</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>3.69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The inability of women to rise up to decision making positions (3.34, 3.67, 3.54) also represents an important reason for the need for women’s participation in the mid-career development programmes. The respondents all agreed that the low qualification of most women within the respective Ministries hinder their advancement, decision making capabilities and consequently a lack of initiatives to improve the workplace. Need for role models within the agricultural extension service system (3.42, 3.57, 3.68) was another reason for women to participate active in the mid-career training programme. The respondents agreed that the Agricultural extension system must increase the number of women professionals in the field not only for their individual contributions, but also for their contribution to the representation of women in the profession, as these women serve as role models for others, whether they intend to or not.
**Distribution of Female Students in the Programmes**

A pool of all the SAFE students in the three institutions showed a marked difference between the population of male and female students. In UCC, the female students constitute only about 33% of the total; the numbers for IPR/IFRA and ABU were 13.4% and 13% respectively.

According to the respondents, female intake in the programmes is decreasing especially in ABU and IPR/IFRA. They claimed that in addition to being few in the field of agricultural extension, working female professionals are also constrained by socio-economic and cultural factors.

The population of female graduates in the three programmes is also low for all three institutions (about 25%, 12% and 7%). This is not surprising as female output is largely dependent on female intake into the training programme.

**Figure 3 and 4.** Distribution of current students and graduates of the SAFE programme

**Figure 5.** Distribution of graduates and current students of the SAFE programme

In UCC, the number of female graduates in 2000/2001 and 2007/2008 (about 11 and 10 female graduates) academic year were the highest since 1996/1997 when the University started producing graduates for the programme. The lowest number of female graduates was recorded in
2003/2004 academic year with only one female graduate. This would be followed by 2009/2010 academic year where only two female graduates would be produced.

**Figure 6.** Distribution of student intake by gender for ABU, Nigeria

The trend in female intake in ABU Nigeria since the year 2002 has been one female student per promotion except in 2007 when three female students were enrolled in the programme.

In IPR/IFRA, Mali, female enrolment in the programme varied between 1 and 5 since the inception of the training programme in the year 2002.

**Figure 7.** Distribution of student intake by gender for IPR/IFRA, Mali

According to the respondents, the highest were recorded between 2003 and 2004 due to the scholarship offer given to female students in the programme by Winrock International coupled with intense publicity and sensitisation about the programme throughout all regions of Mali.

The overall trends of women participation in mid-career training programme in the three universities was low (an average of 21% across the Universities). It is also remarkable to note that for the three universities, female intake is decreasing.
Table 3

*Impediments to the Participation of Female Professional Workers in the SAFE Programmes Across Three Universities*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>IPR/IFRA %</th>
<th>UCC %</th>
<th>ABU %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Limited opportunities that specifically target women</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s inability to compete with men due to lower GPA</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family problems</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communities’ low perception of the female worker’s talent and potential</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men as heads of institutions do not appreciate women’s abilities</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited access to information on opportunities for further education</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government Affirmative Action, requiring that a certain percentage of opportunities directly benefit women, not implemented</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture seen as a domain of men hence few women study it</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio-cultural and religious barriers</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The Analysis of Constraints and Challenges to Women Participation in the Mid-Career Training Programme of The Three Universities Revealed the Following*

Limited scholarship opportunities that specifically target women (100%, 100% & 96%); according to these women there are very few organisations that are ready to offer sponsorship to mid-career professional women on training, rather the focus of most donors and organisations is on the girl child. The salary these women earn while in training is far less than the expenses incurred during the training programme on items like tuition, books, projects, feeding, transportation, etc.

Women not being able to compete with men since their GPA is often lower (100%, 87% & 100%) constituted another hindrance to their participation in the mid-career training programme. According to the respondents, the problem of low GPA hinders most women from participating in the programme because some of them do not even have the required credit level in English and Mathematics for admission into the programme. Most women lack the time, income, self-confidence to realize their full capabilities as lots of social limitations on women’s autonomy exist in the society.

Family problems (100% for respondents from all three institutions) also constituted a major hindrance to the participation of women in the mid-career programmes. Since almost all of these women are married, they are charged with family responsibilities that consequent impact on their time, income and effort.

Communities also have low perception of women’s talent and potential (100%, 88%, 94% respectively). In some African cultures like the Bambara in Mali, sons compared to daughters are regarded as dependable economic assets and sources of future security because they are seen as being able to generate income for the household and remain with their parents to
support them. In this type of cultural environment, very few female children in Mali had the opportunity to attend school for an extended period of time, until the early 1980s after a very long sensitisation drive on the need to educate female children.

The respondents also claimed that men heading institutions do not appreciate women’s abilities (79%, 68% & 72% respectively). This according to the respondents from Mali has made it difficult for the government to support the training of female mid-career professionals as the claim has been that the performance of trained women professionals is limited compared to their male counterparts; in addition the it was cited that difficulties exist in assigning women to locations requiring them to be away from their husbands. The respondents from the northern part of Nigeria also gave similar reasons.

Limited access to information on opportunities for further education (78%, 72%, 82% respectively) also constitute a stumbling block to women participation in training programmes across the countries. Poor publicity and sensitisation about the SAFE training programme were sighted as likely causes.

Government Affirmative Action, requiring a minimum percentage of opportunities directly benefit women, has not been implemented (64%, 56%, 72%). The respondents claimed that the government of Mali, Nigeria and Ghana is gender sensitive and they have taken some affirmative actions requiring that between 25% and 30% of opportunities directly benefit women. However due to the society being male dominated, this affirmative action is hardly adhered to by public organisations.

Agriculture is seen as domain of men (78%, 54%, and 68% respectively), due to some socio-cultural and religious barriers (100% & 98%) hence few women study agriculture. The respondents claimed that women were strongly limited by socio-cultural constraints that have negatively affected their volume of work, roles within the family, rights as well as decision making.

**Recommendations & Conclusion**

The mid carrier training programme would enable women attain leadership positions within the Ministry of Agriculture, the three categories of respondents gave the following recommendations for improved women participation in the programme:

- Putting in place admission policies that ensure at least 25 % of set places for female extension agents and instituting a scholarship scheme for female mid-career students as well as varying the delivery mode of training programmes
- Reducing the after graduation service period requirement from five years to three years for young female extension agents with outstanding performance
- Setting up policies that ensure employment of more female agricultural extension workers in order for gender parity to be attained in the long run and appropriate intervention strategies need to be designed and implemented starting from the lowest levels of the educational system;
- Improved publicity and sensitization about the programme and widening the selection base for students to include other rural development related field as well as considering other type of programmes apart from the regular programme like the sandwich and distance learning programme.
Lessons Learnt and Educational Importance

Although the mid carrier programme will equip women with skills and competence, they lagged behind men in their participation in the BSc programme because of various problem issues; both short and long term strategies should be put in place both at the Universities and governmental levels to enhance female participation in the training programmes.

References


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