CHAPTER-II

Women's Role In The House

Family is the basic unit of society, which resides in a house. The very concept of house connotes male activity while home indicates female role. Thus providing a house is often a male activity, but after a house has been built it is necessary to reproduce a habitat, make it a home, which is usually a female role. The most fundamental and stable fact of women's lives throughout the world is their responsibility for the home, the family and domestic labour. To whatever extent women are integrated into the production process, they still bear the responsibility for their basic element of human existence.

Women fill multiple roles, functioning not only as consumers, but also as producers, home managers, mothers and community organisers.¹ (see figure:1, p.56, and figure:2, p.57)

Only one role of East African rural women remained unchanged with the ups and downs of different periods and that is their effort in the making of household. Except this all the other spheres of their life changed with the passage of time. But this role remained stagnant and in near future also, its changed position cannot be assumed.

Traditionally assigned sex roles delegated certain domestic tasks to women. The responsibility of looking after the food of the family, gathering firewood for fuel, fetching water and looking after children, traditionally were and still are within the women's domain.² (see table:1, pp.51-54) All this tedious tasks involve long hours and hard, physically demanding work ranging from food production at dawn while other members of family are still resting to carrying water and fuel over long distances and caring for small children while working in the fields and clearing land. In parts of East

Africa, women work sixteen hours a day doing housework, caring for children, preparing food and raising between 60 percent and 80 percent of the food for the family. They are primarily responsible for growing food, storing, marketing, and feeding the family and childcare. This unpaid, undocumented and unevaluated household work drains much of the time and energy of women and no doubt basic to the subsistence and survival of the family.

Since these women spend all their energies in making their homes, they are considered as housewives, having no wages, no set working hours and no holidays. Most unfortunate thing about their work is that it is devalued one because it is seen as “women’s work” and does not carry the same prestige as any other type of work done by men. According to Lenin who says-

“Not with standing all the liberating laws that have been passed, woman continues to be a domestic slave because petty housework crushes, strangles, stultifies and chains her to the kitchen and to the nursery and wastes her labour on barbarously unproductive, petty, nerve-wracking, stultifying and crushing drudgery”.

This statement equally applies to East African rural women. Their workload responsibilities (see table: II, p.55) at home can be discussed under the following points:

1. **Food Processing** - women mostly do food processing. They process food crops into various forms, mainly to prolong their availability during the lean seasons and not

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only for family consumption but also for barter sale and in order to produce food in
edible form an enormous amount of work is involved after the harvest. Threshing,
winnowing, drying, boiling (especially for rice paddy) and other activities have to be
undertaken between harvesting and of many staple foods. Correct storage is also a major
concern. As the food is used, exhausting work is again involved in processing it before
cooking, for grains there is stamping as for cassava a lengthy series of process is needed
to remove poisonous substances.7

Apart from it various relishes, spices and vegetables are needed to make the
food edible and these have either to be gathered from the forest or cultivated as a separate
crop.8

2. Water Carrying- In addition to the very high proportion of work associated with
food production and food preparation, East African rural women also spend a major part
of their working day on domestic labour. Providing water is an example.9

Water is of course a basic need in its own right and has to be available for
drinking and household work especially in hot and dry weather. In many areas of East
Africa one estimate is that water carrying there accounts for up to 12 percent of the
daytime calories usage of most of those involved and up to 27 percent in every dry or
very steep areas.10 Instraw study shows that these women walk up to nine kilometers
daily in case they are not lucky to get water from nearby source.11

It is not just the direct impact of wet and dry seasons but also the variability
in the time of onset intensity and extent of these reasons, which affect them. During
winter and rainy season they can use wells near the village while in summer they have to

8 Ibid., p.154.
10 Barbara Rogers, no. 7, p.154.
walk long distances to the river. Water carrying in East Africa accounts for up to 12 percent of the day time-calorie usage of most of those involved and up to 27 percent in very dry or very steep areas.

A UNICEF study on Tanzania shows that women bear the hardships of the work involved in fetching water to the house and spend a substantial part of their caloric consumption in this work, without caring for their own health and taking time and energy from other more productive work and child care. A daily track of two to three hours for water is likely to consume about 600 calories i.e. about one-third to one-quarter of a women's average daily calorie intake. *It is not surprising then that women put great value on the accessibility of water source. Since much of the water needed for domestic use does not have to be of drinking quality.*

A separate study of nine villages in different parts of Tanzania found that the water requirements of the average household needed more than four hours of adult water-carrying time per day, and over an hour of child time, the work was done almost entirely by women. Given the enormous amount of work involved it is obvious that nearby dirty water will often be used in preference to more distant clean water. Since, it is obtained at such cost, it will also be reserved for drinking and cooking rather than non-essential washing. Although there are efforts on the part of women for reducing number of hours for fetching water by using dirty water which is available nearby.

Various UNICEF reports on women and children related to many parts of East Africa point out that the most commonly occurring health problems for women and children in this region as malaria, diarrhoeal diseases and respiratory infections are closely associated with problems of water, hygiene and sanitation. Malarial mosquitoes breed in water pools and in dirty ground. Diarrhoeal diseases are associated with contaminated water and food, unhygienic practices and unsanitary conditions. Smoke

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from domestic cooking fires causes respiratory ailments for women and the young children who are with them while they are cooking. It is likely to be associated with underweight babies in the same way as cigarette smoking in pregnancy.\textsuperscript{16}

3. **Fuel Fetching:** - East African rural women have to spend lot of time in fetching fuel also.\textsuperscript{17} Wood is by far the most important rural fuel for cooking, for lighting. Wood is used by 96 percent of households for cooking and by 45 percent for crop drying and processing.\textsuperscript{18} Studies on domestic fuel wood consumption show that the consumption rate is like that-

- One cubic meter per person per annum,
- Or about 5 cubic meters per household.

Though if included wood used for other activities, consumption reaches about 7.5 cu meter/household/year.\textsuperscript{19} It is a common phenomenon that women must now walk far away for wood, normally 3-5 km two or three times a week. Generally they carry load on their own heads, sometimes they use donkeys or carts or purchase from lorry supplies. Head loads account at least 20 to 30 kg and may go up to 60 kg.\textsuperscript{20}

Several studies give estimates of time consumption up to 4 to 12 hours per week. Wood shortage is compensated by the use of less efficient biomass such as grasses and crop wastes or the use of manure, cutting down productive trees, less cooking of hot

\textsuperscript{16} *Women and Children in Tanzania*, no.14, p.46.

\textsuperscript{17} Ali A. Mazrui, no.2, p.360.


\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
food etc. This problem badly affects women and their cash earning potential is lost and childcare is neglected.\textsuperscript{21}

4. **Child Care Activities**: - Like all other women of the world, East African rural women not only give birth to the children but also bring them up and these infants take up a significant amount of a woman’s time. This continues till they become capable of saving time for their mothers. Even so, children’s productive and reproductive inputs may be counterbalanced to some extent by their consumption and the consequent need for increased household income.\textsuperscript{22} Now the question arises, is productive timework reduced by childcare? Is time devoted to childcare reduced by productive work? The main reduction appears to be in the women’s leisure time with possible implications for her health.

The fact is that women sacrifices her leisure time for childcare or work and this is an indication that she gives importance to these two duties. On the one hand participation of women in the productive work (agriculture) is necessary for the survival of the family and on the other hand their absence from home can subsequently reduce the time dedicated to childcare and food preparation. So women try to compensate by reducing the time devoted to rest and social activities. Time use studies show that the number of hours available to women for such activities is generally quite limited.\textsuperscript{23} This has an adverse effect on women’s health. Mother’s absence from home can also have an adverse effect on child’s nutritional status as well as mother’s nutritional and health status directly influence child’s nutritional status and mortality rate. An increase in maternal malnutrition due to insufficient food intake, over work and inadequate pre-natal care, all events related to increasing economic hardship, is immediately transmitted to the


\textsuperscript{22} Esther Trenchard, *Rural Women’s Work in Sub-Saharan Africa*, no.12, pp.168-69.

child. This in turn produces an increase in the number of stillbirths and of low birth weight babies.\textsuperscript{24}

5. She not only cares for the children but also cares for the elderly kinfolk, e.g., mother-in-law, father-in-law.\textsuperscript{25}

6. Maintainer of social relations - she maintains cordial relations with relatives and neighbours through the exchange of gifts and visits.\textsuperscript{26}

7. Apart from the above roles East African rural women participate in the life of society through community associations, religious groups and wide variety of other groups and organisations in which they often compromise the majority of members. Women's social participation is governed by a number of factors. Including their household and economic status and traditional customs and attitudes, which may either promote or restrict their activities.

8. Women are the significant contributors to the cultural life of the community by preserving the traditional culture in song, dance, story telling, art and ritual.\textsuperscript{27} When a woman is performing so many tasks it is very natural that time becomes constrain for her. This is true in the case of East African rural women; they carry a very heavy burden of a double or even triple workload involving a very long working day. Marilee Karl quotes Boserup who conducted research in 1970. She noted that

"In East Africa women put in a much longer day than men gathering fuel wood, fetching water and caring out


\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.

housework, childcare, food preparation and much of the agricultural labour".28

Housework accounts for a larger proportion of the women’s time than any other single activity.29

About Kenya the report of an inter-agency team financed by the United Nations Development programme and organised by the International Labour office says that the division of labour between men and women in the rural areas is discriminatory. The role of women is governed by traditions set long ago, in different economic circumstances. Women are bound to work extremely long hours much longer than the men in the same families. Naturally women don’t get sufficient time to complete all their duties satisfactorily.

Almost all women in rural Kenya are engaged fairly regularly in economic activities moreover; even when not busy with economic activities they are usually active in household duties. An attempt to make a distinction between economic and non-economic activities seems somewhat arbitrary in the case of rural areas, particularly when both of these kinds, of activities contribute to raise family living standards.30 Export and Industrials Development Division report on Uganda says that the women in Uganda spend nearly 18 hours of the 24 hours of a day in carrying out one activity or another arising of the triple roles that they play namely-productive, community, reproduction. The men on the other hand spend a mere 6 hours engaged in “actual” (productive)

28 Ibid., pp.50-59.


activities in complete contrast to the women's activities. Eighteen hours of the men's time is spent on recreation, socialising, resting and leisure.\textsuperscript{31} This is supported by \textit{UNICEF} report.\textsuperscript{32} Hence the World Bank asserts-

"If leisure time is a valid indicator of well being, women are very poor indeed." \textsuperscript{33}

Uganda like most of the countries of the world is governed by the patriarchal system where men are the dominant players in decision making although women shoulder most reproductive, productive, community management responsibilities, many of which are not remunerated or reflected in national statistics. Women are considered lower in comparison to men and this is due to gender imbalances that arise from the unequal opportunities and access to and control over productive resources and benefits.\textsuperscript{34}

Thus all East African rural women irrespective of land status of the family are estimated to be providing 13 to 17 hours of productive labour in different chores. This energy in performing more tasks than physically feasible draws attention to the plight of East African rural women. These rural women have to spend considerably longer hours and greater energy in meeting daily necessities to fetch potable water and cover a substantial area for fuel collection. Thus women in rural areas provide not only a substantial part of the labour force engaged in agriculture and allied activities but they are the one who keep on doing tedious, repetitive and unavoidable household work without any complain.

Furthermore, these women have to face the curse of poverty. In Tulya Muhika's words who conducted a household survey in Uganda-


\textsuperscript{34} Contributed by Kuldip Gupta, no. 31 p.96.
"The poorest of the hard-core poor are likely to be .... in female- headed households."35

UNITED NATIONS, ILO, UNICEF, UNESCO reports say that the most unfortunate thing about these women is that most censuses do not provide the information about women. Tasks such as cleaning, cooking, nurturing etc. are generally understood to be a part of domestic work. The net result is that a large number of women who are active in the non-commodity sectors of the economy tend to be excluded from the census enumeration. The identity of women as wives or mothers overshadows their contribution on their own farm or in the family enterprise.

East African rural women need the following facilities to carry on their household activities smoothly-

1. Drinking water supply
2. Fuel for cooking
3. Fuel for lighting
4. Electricity
5. Child Care Centres, so that their workload can be lessened

At last it can be said that these silent workers are forced to accept their role in society without anybody's support either from their family, society or the state at large. This role of the women has been imposed on them without caring how much problems they have to face in carrying out their responsibilities, which never end.

### Conceptual Division Of Labour By Sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Women’s Tasks</th>
<th>Men’s Tasks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tasks assigned exclusively to women:</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Washing dishes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Making beds</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sweeping</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Carrying Water</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Regular house plastering</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Taking maize to mill</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Winnowing</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Shelling and drying beans</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Collecting and chopping firewood</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mending and pressing clothes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Bathing and dressing children</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Cutting thatching grass</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Brewing</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Maintaining and operating lamps</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Cleaning storage grounds</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Building inside fire</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Feeding chickens
Spreading natural fertilizer
Harvesting vegetables
Weeding vegetables
Buying Kitchen Utensils.

**Tasks assigned exclusively to men:**

Building house frame
Thatching
Building fences
Building outbuildings
Clearing land for cultivation
Making and repairing tools
Slaughtering (except chickens)
Driving tractor
Buying farm supplies

Plowing
Cutting maize at harvest
Hauling
Breaking rocks
Buying furniture
Making kitchen utensils

**Tasks usually done by women, but not forbidden to men:**

Milking
Collecting eggs
Selling Vegetables
Welcoming visitors
Slaughtering chickens
Making kitchen utensils
Carrying heavy loads

Cooking
Feeding chickens
Weeding vegetables
Harvesting vegetables
Buying food

Tasks usually done by men, but not forbidden to women:
Initial rough mudding of house
Cattle health care
Ploughing
Cutting maize at harvest
Trimming hedges
Helping children with schoolwork

Giving salt to cattle
Breaking ground with hoe
Buying household items

Tasks assigned to both sexes equally:
Planting
Weeding with hoe (maize)
Husking maize at harvest
Spreading chemical fertilizer
Buying clothes

Tasks, which are not exclusively assigned to either sex:
Herding cattle
Disciplining children
Playing with children
Drawing water for cattle
Giving salt to cattle
Sorting maize coles

Note: Men perform tasks assigned to them only when they are physically present at home. That rarely happens. Naturally women perform men's tasks.

Table II-

Percentage of hours of work associated with specific tasks attributed to women in East Africa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tasks</th>
<th>Women’s percentage of total hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food production/ Crop cultivation</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic food storage</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food processing</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animal husbandry</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brewing</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplying water</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing fuel</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

MULTIDISCIPLINARY ROLES OF WOMEN

WOMEN AND ECOLOGICAL ENGINEERING

Figure: 2.

MOBILITY
- Rural-rural
- Rural-urban
- Urban-rural

AGE
- Child-bearing
- Age

SEX
- Gender differential

DEMOGRAPHY
- Central economy
  - Government sector
- Market economy
  - Private sector
- Subsistence economy
  - Informal sector

ECONOMY
- Natural environment
  - Time
  - Animals
  - Plants
  - Soil
  - Water
- Social environment
  - Education
  - Technology
  - Art
  - Recreation
  - Economy
  - Religion
  - Language
  - Social organization
  - Political organization

ENVIRONMENT
- Technology availability
- Population growth
- Family goals
- Age
- Gender

WOMEN'S ROLES

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