

Role of Women in Socio-Economic Transformation in Kisii District During the Two World Wars (1914-1918 and 1939-1945)

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Abstract: Dobie (2003) has correctly asserted that women's contribution to the World Wars has gone unheralded. Even though this is the situation, women in the Western World have received some attention compared to African women. African women did not actively participate in the two World Wars and this has been misconstrued to mean that they did not make any meaningful socio-economic contribution to the Wars and their respective societies. Resulting from this, scholarly works about the contribution of Africans to the World Wars have largely remained to be male-centric and gender blind. Drawing from archival and secondary sources of data, this study argues that even though African women were not directly involved in combat, they played economic roles in their respective societies and these roles not only led to the socio-economic transformation of their respective societies but also contributed to the War efforts.

Keywords: Women, Transformation, Kisii, Kiambu, World Wars.

1. INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of the two World Wars not only disrupted social order in Africa but also occasioned extra demands on the Gusii society. Social order was disrupted in the sphere of division of labour. Division of labour in Gusii society was gendered in that men and women played different roles in different social, economic and political spheres of life (LeVine and LeVine 1966, Silberschmidt 1999). Traditionally, men in Gusii society were at the helm of socio-economic and political decision-making docket (LeVine and LeVine 1966). This is bearing in mind the fact that the Gusii society was predominantly patriarchal. However, the absence of men in households during the two World Wars changed the equation in that women assumed the position of heads of households. As heads of households, women had to make key socio-economic decisions which had hitherto been a preserve of men (LeVine and LeVine 1966, Silberschmidt 1999). Only the political sphere remained largely in the hands of men because it was in the hands of elders.

Apart from disrupting social order, gendered division of labour, the Wars also generated a higher demand for male labour as well as food supply to the colonial military. Gusii men were not freely willing to join the military and the colonial government had to devise ways through which it would squeeze men out of Kisii County to join the military. One way through which this was realized was through increase in taxes charged on Africans. This had the effect of pushing men out of their countryside to seek paid work in order to raise money with which to pay taxes. The impact of taxes on labour supply during the colonial period is well documented (Fibaek and Green 2019, Forstater 2005, Manchulle 1997, Freund 1984, Dilley 1937 and Fieldhouse 1971).

Taxation alone was not enough to push men into the colonial military. Women softened men's hearts to join the military in two ways. Firstly, they were left behind to take care of the man's land, property, children and aging parents/grandparents. Secondly, they provided a channel through which men in the military would send money back at home. Financial remittances were important not only in keeping men away in the military for longer periods (knowing that their taxes were paid and their families taken care of) but also for investments. Women were trusted by their absentee husbands as

instruments of production. Women used financial remittances from their husbands serving in the army to buy farming inputs such as high-yielding seeds (Killingray 2001, Grundlingh 1992).

As stated earlier, the two World Wars generated two main demands on Africans. One was the supply of labour and the production of food to feed the soldiers. The first demand was met by men and the Second demand was met by women. Thus, while the war signaled the beginning of economic misfortune, African women became responsible for lessening the effects of the economic crisis. Economic crisis came into the fore because most of the European farmers (settlers as they were known) enlisted in the two World Wars. They abandoned farming which was the backbone of the Kenyan economy. As a result, agricultural exports (cash crops and livestock products) dwindled.

Recruitment of African men into the military was not a one-time event. It was a continuous process because most of those who were recruited either deserted or were killed or suffered permanent disabilities. Those who died or suffered permanent disabilities had to return home to the warm reception of their wives. Like children and the elderly, those who suffered permanent disabilities had to depend on their wives' support. Those who died while in battle left most responsibilities to their widows. Indeed, most men died in combat or suffered disabilities. Edmonds (1968: 400), while referring to African men who participated in the First World War, states that:

192 were killed, 557 were wounded, 84 died of diseases, and 434 were disabled. By 1916, the number of Africans fighting for Germany had fallen significantly as result of death from casualties or diseases. 4 Also, of those who fell ill, 472 died, and 8,219 were left seriously ill. Edmonds also demonstrates how diseases, mainly malaria, dysentery, yellow fever, and pneumonia killed many Africans during and after the war. Uncooked rice, for instance, which most of the Africans depended on as a source of food caused dysentery. These casualties reduced the population in Africa as many suffered from death both on the battlefield and at home.

In spite of their role in socio-economic transformation in Kisii County during the two World Wars, Gusii women have not received adequate scholarly attention. Instead, it is women in the Western World, who participated directly in war as nurses and ambulance drivers, who have received some scholarly attention (Dobie 2003, Cambell 1993, Dickon 2015, Harfield 2005, and Cottam 1980). Indeed, when the First world War broke out, in 1914, it was at a time when it was unthinkable, in Africa, for women to fight alongside men. For this reason, there are scattered studies which have voiced the direct contribution of African women in the World Wars as well as in the socio-economic transformation of their respective societies. But these studies only acknowledge the direct contribution of African women to the war efforts. Farwell (1989), for example, has narrated how women supplied water and other products during the War to various military camps (Farewell 1989:288). There was indirect contribution that African women made towards the war and to their respective societies during the two World Wars. By focusing on Kisii County, this study makes an attempt at recognizing the indirect socio-economic contribution of Gusii women during the two World Wars.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study chose Kisii County as its study location. Kisii County is located about 30 miles (50 km) south east of Lake Victoria and it is bordered by six counties namely: Narok to the south, Kisumu to the north, Bomet to the south east and Nyamira to the east. By the time the two World Wars broke out, Kisii County was mainly inhabited by a people called the Gusii or Abagusii. The Gusii are Bantu-speaking people who inhabit the South Western highlands of Kenya. They trace their ancestry back to one ancestor called Mogusii son of Osogo (Mayer 1949, LeVine and LeVine 1966, Aberi 2009, Ochieng' 1974).

A historical research study design was employed in order to trace the socio-economic changes which women occasioned in Kisii County during the two World Wars (between 1914-1918 and 1939-1945). Data which informed this study was drawn from secondary and archival sources. Archival data was sourced from the Kenya National Archives while secondary data was sourced mainly from books and journals. Data was analyzed qualitatively and the findings presented according to emerging themes.

Women's safeguard of household landholdings during the two World Wars

The outbreak of the two World Wars (between 1914-1918 and between 1939-1945), witnessed massive migration of men from the Gusii society in search of paid work in the military. The massive outmigration of Gusii males was triggered by an increase in government taxes charged on Africans. The increase in taxes was done through an amendment to the Native Authority (amendment) Ordinance 1940 (Colony and Protectorate of Kenya 1941:122). The demand for African labour in the military was dire. This is bearing in mind the fact that when the First World War broke out, the means of transportation had not modernized much and they relied on Africans as porters/carriers. African men who were recruited in the army carried food, guns and other army accessories.

The increase in African taxes was not just aimed at pushing men into the military. Taxation was also aimed at raising the much-needed revenue to finance war efforts. Also, taxes were aimed at pushing Africans to produce more food on their farms in order to feed the military. As for pastoralists, the increase in taxes served to push them to sell their livestock to the military. Indeed, many Gusii men from Kisii County joined the military. Men who participated in the Wars risked losing their land. The Wars broke out at a time when land holders did not have land title deeds. However, many men who joined the military did not lose their land holdings because they left their wives and mothers behind to take care of their land.

Being a predominantly farming community, the Gusii people placed a lot of importance to land. This is bearing in mind the fact that land supported their two main economic activities namely farming and livestock rearing. A man in Gusii society would acquire as much land as possible depending on how many wives he had. This is because, each wife would have land of her own upon which she derived food for herself and her children. Thus, while women played an important role in ensuring that men acquired as much land as possible during peace-time, they also ensured that the same land was safeguarded when their husbands were away during war-time. Polygamy was, therefore, not beneficial to Gusii men, it was also beneficial to the two World Wars.

Silberschmidt (1999) notes that polygamy was highly upheld in Gusii society. To offset land-based feuds between women married to one man, each wife was allocated land to cultivate by her husband (Kenya National Archives, DP/18/13). The wife and her children were supposed to be, agriculturally, an independent self-supporting unit (Were and Nyamweya 1986). Even though married women had access to land allocated to them by their husbands, men had exclusive rights over the control of land, property and cattle. Likewise, inheritance of land, property and cattle was always on the male line (Kenya National Archives, DP/18/13). The outbreak of the two World Wars made women to assume a significant role in the safeguard of family lands and property. This is bearing in mind the fact that the Wars disrupted the traditional concept of heads of households. Whereas the general thinking was that households were headed by men, at least in theory, the War occasioned female headed households.

Women's safeguard of household land holdings and property benefitted the two World Wars in two respects. The first is that men were willing to join the colonial military without having to fear that their lands and property would remain untended. Land in those days was communally owned and a man was free to settle on uninhabited and unused land. Secondly, the morale of men in the War was boosted since they were less worried about the welfare of their families and property. As heads of households, women who were left behind by their men, took care of children and the elderly. Thus, women played a leading role in safeguarding land, property and members of their families who were in need of care while at the same time freeing their absentee husbands of worries. They did not just safeguard the lands, but they also put the same to productive use. Thus, Gusii women made it easy for the colonial government to recruit Gusii men into the army. The next section examines how Gusii women's reproductive roles contributed to the socio-economic transformation of their societies for the benefit of the two World Wars.

Women's steady supply of military labour during the two World Wars

As we have observed in the preceding section, the two World Wars took away a lot of male labour from the Gusii society. This disrupted not only the social order but also the gendered division of labour. In spite of this, women continued to play their role of procreation in order to ensure steady supply of labour for future needs. In fact, some of the boys who were born during the First World War participated, as soldiers, in the Second World War. The need for a steady supply of male labour was important in respect of the two World Wars. In the first place, the First World War benefitted from labour supply which women had made possible through procreation and child rearing in the pre-war times. In the second place, labour was needed in order to produce food for the military.

Apart from war demands on Gusii labour, the Gusii society itself needed a steady supply of labour during the two World Wars for two reasons. Firstly, the Gusii people were surrounded by cattle-raiding communities namely the Maasai and the Kalenjin (Kenya, National Archives, DC/KSI/1/2, Ochieng' 1974). Not all the Gusii men joined World War efforts. But even those who remained behind had other wars to fight locally. It was customary for the Gusii and their neighboring Maasai people to engage in incident of cattle thefts. Thus, while the World Wars took away a bigger chunk of the male population from Kisii County, there was yet other local wars (involving the Maasai and the Gusii) which required the participation of men (Gusii warriors). The District Commissioner, for example, reported in 1943 that:

Internally, the district has been quiet and on the whole the people have responded extremely well to the various demands made upon them due to war. The Kisii-Maasai border however, has not been quiet and the year opened with Maasai raids and armed forays into Kisii country in January. Forty police were drafted to the border and outposts and patrols were maintained throughout the year. In spite of this the Maasai raided again in October and on this occasion there was some retaliation by the Kisii. The Kisii offenders were punished but unfortunately the Maasai have not been traced" (Kenya National Archives, DC/KSI/1/5, Kisii District Annual report 1943, p.2)

Thus, Gusii society needed a steady supply of warriors to protect their society from external attacks. Secondly, the Gusii society was predominantly a farming community and farming in those days was labour intensive. The two World Wars broke out at a time when work in Kisii County was largely manual in nature. Women ensured a steady supply of human labour through procreation. Procreation and child rearing were perhaps the greatest socio-economic contribution that women in Gusii society undertook for the benefit of the Gusii society and the war efforts.

Survival of labour was equally important because labour itself was threatened during those days by high mortality rates caused by wars and disease epidemics. That women played their procreation role well was a contribution enough to the two World Wars because there was a steady supply of African men to the colonial army. As was the case in times of peace, human labour was still highly valued during war times. While the Wars took most of the male labour (by way of men joining the military service), it was women who ensured a steady supply of labour through procreation. Children who were born when the WWI broke out had become of age during the WWII period. Indeed, most of them served in WWII because they were aged about 25 years old.

Women as food producers during the two World Wars

As we have observed in the preceding sections, the two World Wars placed a lot of demand on Africans to produce and supply food to the military. The wars having taken a way Gusii men for military services, women and their children continued to be the chief producers and suppliers of food to the military. In the arena of food production, women and children had played this role since the precolonial period. This is because men (and most of them were polygamous) allocated a piece of land to each wife to cultivate and feed herself and her children (Silberschmidt 1999).

Through their traditional roles as food producers, women came to contribute a lot towards socio-economic transformation of their societies and, through it, benefitted the two World Wars. Food production and supply was a cumbersome task that included preparation of field (land) for planting, planting itself, weeding, harvesting and drying crop harvests and then storing. Whereas men helped their wives and children in pre-war times, all was left to the children and women during the war times. Silberschmidt (1999) asserts that a lot of Gusii men migrated in search of wage labor when the First World War broke out. As a result,

women's labor-time became increasingly over-utilized- it was actually exploited.... between food and cash crops production, the amount of time women spent cultivating increased dramatically.

Boserup (1980) has also underscored the positive impact of male-outmigration on women's social status when she states that women became independent, because men went away for years or even forever. As a result, women became heads of households and sole providers for the non-working members of their families.

Also, cattle raids intensified during the war times and most men were left to guard the Gusii community against Maasai raids. Again, this left women to do most of the farm work as men guarded their communities against external raids. As observed earlier, the two World Wars placed a lot of demand on food. Food would only reach the military areas through trade. Like food production, trade in food was labour intensive. The next section examines how women played their roles in ensuring that that food they produced reached soldiers in the military through trade.

Women traders in Kisii District during the two World Wars

We have discussed in the preceding section that the two World Wars created a lot of demand for food and women (being heads of households) became highly involved in food production (farming). The demand for food was not only centered at the point of its production. Urban population was not involved in farming. Thus, high demand for food was in urban areas compared to rural areas. This being the case, and in order to make food accessible to urban population, trade in food was a necessity. Transporting food to urban areas was not an easy undertaking. This is because of poor road networks and lack of mechanized transportation systems such as vehicles (Kenya national Archives, DC/KSI/1/2). This is the situation which prevailed when the First World War broke out in 1914.

As unfortunate as the situation was at the time, women played an important role in making trade in food possible. Much of trading activities in colonial Kenya were undertaken by Indians (Spencer 1981). This is bearing in mind the fact that Indians were denied land ownership and, most of them, were encouraged to reside in urban areas. Having no access to land, Indians relied on food trade. While they mostly engaged in food trade, Indians relied on Africans for the supply of the same.

Again, it was not safe for Indians to venture into rural areas to obtain food for trade because of the danger of being attacked by Africans. Arising out of this situation, women played an important role in facilitating food trade during the two World Wars. Silberschmidt (1999:47) observes that Gusii women "developed a wide range of strategies in order to get access to the product of their labour. For example, they would often sell their produce directly to middlemen-though at a lower price- instead of delivering it to the official authorities....". Sale of food items was a booming business during the two World Wars

and, through sale of food, the economic prosperity in Kisii County was realized. During the Second World War, for example, the District Commissioner for Kisii observed, in 1945, that:

With large increases in cereal production, greater participation of Africans in the sale of produce, increases in the sales of coffee, the compulsory sale of cattle, and conscription of labour, much more money found its way into Gusiland than ever before (Kenya National Archives, DC/KSI/1/7).

Sometimes, women avoided to travel long and tedious distances to the market by establishing trade links with Indian traders. Through such links, women's economic activities, especially trade, enabled them to make a kill and earn money with which they bought imported goods. Writing about this in 1914, the District Commissioner for Kisii County noted that:

A very considerable impetus was given to trade in this District during the year by the adoption of the system (originated in Kisumu) of permitting Indian traders to accompany [colonial] officers on safari with trade goods, which the natives were encouraged to buy... (Kenya National Archives, DC/KSI/1/2).

The demand for maize also shot up during the WWII and attracted traders from all walks of life. In Kisii County, for example, it was reported that an Arab was buying maize from that County in 1940 at a market near Ikonge, along Ikonge - Kitutu Road (See letter dated 23rd February 1940 from Agricultural officer, Mr. W. G. Sunman). There was, also, an increase in the growing of millet (*wimbi*) by the people of Nyamira, mostly women. There were buyers who could buy millet and sell to an Indian (Kenya National Archives, DP/3/11).

3. CONCLUSION

It is generally agreed that war is an enemy of economic development. The outbreak of the two World Wars had a devastating effect on the economy of Kisii County as it took away human labour which is an important ingredient of development. The War did not just place demand on male labour but it also placed demand on food supplies. Kisii County supplied a lot of male labour to the two World Wars and, by doing so, took away an important ingredient of economic development. This having taken place; the women took up male roles and spearheaded socio-economic transformation in Kisii County in various ways.

In the first place, women became heads of households and made key economic decisions. As heads of households, women took up roles relating to livestock rearing, farming and trading. Livestock rearing was a traditional role played by men but women became livestock keepers when their husbands were away during the two World Wars. They also organized farming activities. As heads of households, women took over men's traditional roles and combined them with traditional female roles thereby increasing their burden.

Also, as heads of households, women were forced to increase food production beyond subsistence levels because the War placed a higher demand on food. What they produced as surplus had to be transported to the market for sale and the women undertook transportation of goods to the market place. Some of these markets were far removed from the rural areas. The roads were not well developed and they had a difficult time transporting farm produce to markets.

By putting vast areas of land under cultivation, women in Kisii County helped to secure their absentee husbands' land from being grabbed. Even though land was plentiful during the two World Wars, land title deeds had not been issued to land holders. Thus, absentee landlords were liable to have their landholdings grabbed. Even though land was communally owned in the olden days, members of the community were allowed to occupy 'unoccupied' lands.

More importantly, women in Kisii County played the key role of ensuring adequate supply of labour through procreation. This is bearing in mind the fact that the two World Wars had taken male labour away from Kisii County. A lot of the men who joined the Wars were killed in battle and some returned with disabilities. Human labour was very much needed for socio-economic transformation in Kisii County bearing in mind the fact that the County lacked technological advancement and most economic activities revolved around manual labour.

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