

Women in Academia

An Autobiographic Perspective for a Woman in Burkina Faso

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Introduction

In most African countries, the proportion of women in the agricultural research and development is still very low. The average women involved in the agricultural research and in agricultural leadership position is less than 20%. This situation in the Global South is similar in Burkina Faso. With more than 52% of female in the total population, the number of women involved in scientific research is very low and almost absent in the higher position where decisions are being made. For instance, among 337 researchers in total in the agricultural research Centre in Burkina Faso, only 52 are female with very few senior female researchers.

Data were collected through documentary review and interview was conducted with human resource persons at the ministry of agriculture and ministry of higher education, the gender focal person in these institutions were interviewed. These were combined with an autobiographic study, in order to understand the issue related to women in academia. This paper argues that despite stereotyping and socio-cultural conditions, women can reach doctoral and higher decision-making positions. As the results show, they have a great potential and can better conduct researches to boost the agricultural sector and therefore help improve socio-economic development of their countries. It appears necessary to educate girls and women so that they consider pregnancy, childbirth, family management, and their social role not as a handicap/obstacle, which stops them developing their huge potential, but as part of their great nature and therefore as just a challenge as any other challenge that one faces. It is also important that scholarship institutions give the flexibility to women

who chose to combine their spousal role and study. Finally, if women are competent, there is a need that they are promoted to decision making positions.

In the following lines, we will first give a brief review on gender in scientific research and development in light with the social construction theory which help us unpack what influences women's decision making by focusing on an autobiographic study of one personal carrier development throughout time. Finally, the auto-biographic study experience helped propose the ways forward so that better policy will be put into place to motivate and encourage women to get into STEM research in Burkina Faso and above in Africa context.

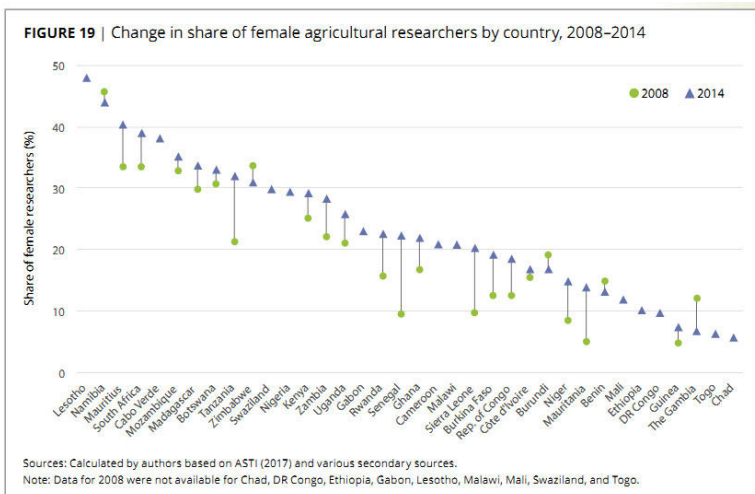
Literature Review: Gender in Higher Education

The scoping review exercise was very useful in the choice of the case study and in identifying the agricultural sector as a potentially interesting case for such study. Indeed, the review broadened my understanding of the history of the topic to be investigated. By writing the literature review, according to Silverman (2005, 340), “you show that: you are able to locate your study within a kind of topics, methods and theories used in your discipline.” This present literature has helped achieve this. Indeed, we have explored documents in relation with women in Higher education and in STEM in particular. It has now been established that Africa's new investment should go beyond primary and secondary education for girls, there is the need and that to be able to uncover the full economic and social benefits from women, they need to integrate higher education system and through this, they can position themselves into leading position to better contribute into the continent development. The different institutions such as AU, UNESCO, AWARD are investing into women in addressing gender equality gap in terms of education and capacity building through leadership trainings. The structural changes brought about recently in the last three decades; the liberalization of the market and had put forward STEM as the driver of economic growth. As such, Africa's political leaders are building their hope into STEM for transforming the continent. This situation is actually the same for the other fields such as social sciences. According to the 2016 Gender Gap Report, the more one moves higher in terms of education the more the number of women is scanty. The report underlines the negative stereotypes and lack of role models, lowering girls' performance and hinder their aspirations. With these difficulties, some solutions are proposed through African institutions actions such as, African Women in Agricultural Research and Develop-

ment (AWARD), African Women Educationalists (FAWE), the Organisation for Women in Science for the Developing World (OWSD), etc. Most of the government initiatives in Africa are build on political decision or NGO and associations. So far, these initiatives have not managed to really raise the number of women in science, quest for relevant development paradigms and policy conceptualization to address effectively the urgent need for Africa collectively to appropriate the process of genuine progress. Assié-Lumumba (2007) considers this as a right of women to higher education and argued that despite women's personal fulfilment, which is very important if African societies and countries really want to move forward and fight against poverty.

As shown from the figure below, there is still a lot to be done in Africa to increase the number of girls in higher education and research. For instance, between 2008 and 2014, the percentage of women in agricultural research increased to around 8%. It has been in this move for the past 5 years.

Figure 1: Proportion of women among agricultural researchers in Africa



The literature on women in higher education in Burkina Faso in general is very low and reflect the Global South. Up to now, more than 70% of the population cannot read or write. The level of literacy has changed over time when in comparison to the early 2000, for example. In terms of schooling, we ob-

serve that in urban areas, there are less disparities between the sexes. Although the accent is in recent years to promote girls' schooling, Wouango (2017) shows that nowadays parents encourage their girls to attain higher education. Despite many difficulties they are competing with boys in the classrooms. However, these new trends encounter lots of difficulties after master level for girls. So far, little has been done in terms of research to help inform policy makers on strategic planning to support girls up to doctorate level. The agricultural sector remains similar to such reality in Burkina Faso and in many parts of the world.

As in many African countries, the number of women in STEM with regard to agriculture is very low when we compare it to the average number of women in the population. It is shown that Between 2014/2015 and 2015/2016, the trend of new students entering University shows a strong increase in the field of Agriculture 128%. The enthusiasm of students for this area is beneficial and encouraging because agriculture occupies more than 80% of the active population. The number of girls remain low, at 27% (DGESS 2016).

It becomes, therefore, very important for the few existing women scientists to get organised and undertake gender-based researches to inform country level policies for the sake of women. Most often, women associations are more politically rather than scientifically capable of conducting gender-based research. Conducting research on this issue would help plan how women can be enrolled into higher education system.

Method

The present research uses both qualitative and quantitative data collected through documentary review and interviews to unpack the gender issue in agricultural research and development in Burkina Faso. As such, it investigates the number of women, their position and the process through which they get involved into research. We tried to look at their contributions through observation into the agricultural sector in Burkina Faso. Our study's characteristics, orientation and actions (Hart 1998) concern the "how", the "why", and the process involved in the choice of a woman to get involved in scientific research. Also, we underline the merits that came up from our interviews.

The role of women in scientific research in Burkina Faso's development was the first broad question that I began my research with. From this broad scope, I started investigating the literature on the evolution of the number of women in scientific research in Africa. This scoping review had the objective of un-

dertaking a study, which sought to understand the position and engagement of women in agricultural research and how this impact on economic and social development. Careful consideration revealed a need for a case study, in order to attest, reject, and make some contributions to the ongoing and building research on how we can increase the number of women in science and how women scientists do make a difference when in a leading position. Women intervention, which claims to help alleviate poverty, are not only seen as the most vulnerable social group, but in contrast, they are considered also as the ones which role makes huge contribution. However, little has been done to understand the extent to which women in agricultural research remain weak in number. The present research therefore adds a new way of thinking, new dimensions of seeing the problem, and new propositions about women in science. I specifically use here the social construction approach (Pinch and Bijker 1984) to unpack gender in agricultural research and development in Burkina Faso.

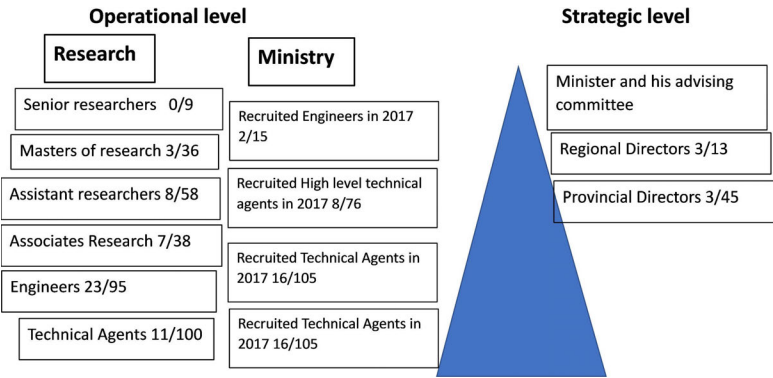
Following a careful consideration of the above aspects, I settled on a narrower questions: what are the proportion of women in agricultural research in Burkina Faso? From a personal experience, how can we contribute into promoting women in agricultural research and in academia? These questions were framed with the aim of contributing to the research to inform policy makers and strategic level actors on how to encourage and increase the number of women in scientific research, in order to generate sustainable socio-economic development. As a result, it becomes important that in terms of increasing the number of women in science, it is very important that we try to understand this interpretative ability to understand social facts. This in-depth and detailed study on one case strives to understand such situations as a whole. Thus, social, economic, political, and historical reasons have shaped the issue regarding women in agricultural research and development.

Research Results

The research shows that from national level, women in agricultural sector are very few. Indeed, based on the national agricultural research centre, our study clearly shows that women represent less than 1/6 of the total staff members. Despite these few numbers, women are making an impact. For instance, one of the researchers is engaged in the rural community where she created an association and is investing a lot of her time with these vulnerable people. As a

result, it shows how people actively enter into the causal process through individual and joint action' (Puddephatt and Sprus 2007, 265) appears very critical in one life. It offers the best alternative. I intend to be consistent with Silverman (2005) that the social phenomena under which I have managed to reach a doctoral level can be used to understand how and why women are made lagging behind. Most of the time, our personal desire and how we see or consider as successful life is what lead and drive us through. Sometimes, our environment, mostly the people we love, are able to influence, either greatly positively or negatively, our way of seeing good life if its through academia or otherwise.

Figure 2: Representation of proportion of women in the national agricultural research Centre and the Ministry of Agriculture



As can be seen from the above figure, the more we go higher in education, the fewer the number of women becomes. At some point, there is none at all. In the high-level research position, there are even fewer women in 2017. Even though there is an obvious engagement of women in the agricultural research and development, as discussed above, the social construction influences their carrier. More recently, in 2024, only 2 women get to the high level in agricultural research. Women, as a result, after reaching certain ages and educational level, are more concerned about marriage, getting children, and having family life.

WHY ARE WOMEN STILL LAGGING BEHIND?

Getting old without these advantages in an African context is similar to a 'failure in one life' and this is true in most young girls thinking, to the point that, this is what constitute their priority in life rather than that of having a successful carrier job some time.

The results show that research is a very demanding career and it is very difficult to combine laboratory work, fieldwork, trips, and studies for such a long time because young girls desire to get enrolled in marriage life as soon as they pass the age of 18. Another difficulty is the family life management with pregnancy and child care, which also hinder women who want to have career in research. However, the case of the personal biography contrasts with these difficulties, because as a woman, I combined pregnancy, childcare and family management with PhD study and part-time job. Such achievement was an option that I made with the support of my husband and the institution at the University of Nottingham.

The debate around gender, sometimes, is full of passion and linked to politics, rather than really research based issue that seek to find sustainable solutions. As a result, most of the proposed solutions are built without any deep research. So far, the funding bodies and policies do not give priorities to such empirical studies so that they use the research results in policy advocacies and to build country level policies.

Stereotyping and pre-concept about conducting long study is beyond women's personal control as this depends on her social construction of facts. Family life management and lack of support from a partner remain important obstacle. On the 14th of March 2017, Mofolorunsho Abidémi published the following on a Science dev blog: "If a woman has her place in a laboratory, let her seize it and do her job. The woman ideally has the same aptitudes as the man for science. We will have to stop – and especially that she (the woman) will stop one day with the debate on gender and that the woman needs to roll up her sleeves!" So far, many women have pull their sleeves! But they need the institutional support to be able to fulfil their ambition.

An Itinerary of a Woman: Autobiographic Case

I had managed to reach a PhD level in my study in the field of STIS (Science, Technology and Innovation Studies in Sociology and Social Policy), thanks to

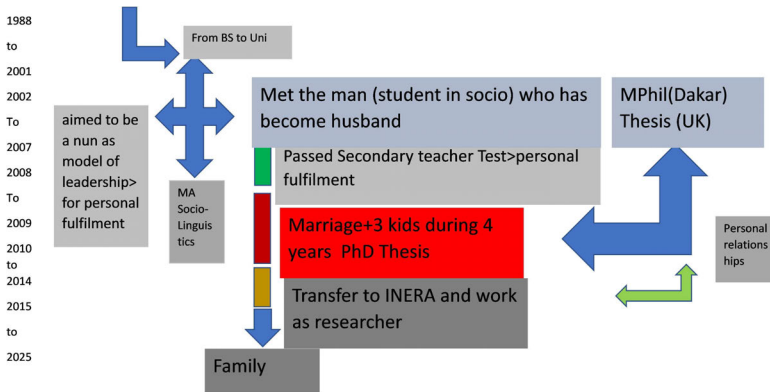
my social construct and institutional settings. My personal 'autobiographic' shows that the social construction has played a very important role in my personal carrier development and had made me who I am today. It does not mean I achieved a lot; it just means I managed to get through. These took me through so many different steps and levels.

After 8 years in boarding school, I have decided with my environment influence, to get into the university and leave the boarding school and the training as a None. Thus, the dream I had since my childhood had vanished and I made my decision through the influence of my environment, especially my friends who were almost all leaving the boarding school. I experienced a lot of pressure while at the university and was hesitating between going back to boarding school and be trained as a none or having to choose to have a husband and build a family life. Meeting my future husband as a student has led me to reshape my study from arts to linguistics to STIS. His influence wiped away my consideration of being a none. I got a teaching job in a high school with my government after my master graduation. My dream was to be honest and I felt it will be fulfilled as a working young girl who can take care of herself. Then getting married and having kids were my priority given that I was getting old beyond the average years in my context at age 28 at that time. My future husband, at that time, had encouraged me to register for a PhD. My PhD study was more influenced by him, he believed me and supported me through this journey. As a result, I was able to achieve it despite being a mum. Taking care of a husband as my adduction says and giving birth to 3 kids all during the 4 years PhD as a personal fulfilment shaped by my environment.

In fact, as an African woman, I did not want to miss such joy of motherhood because of a PhD, but I did have my husband fully supporting me through out, in a context where it was only us away from home in the UK. The following figure shows the different steps in my academic and social life as a woman, and it raises the issue of what a good life is and who can define it in my point of view. That is to say, the priority of what makes one happy, what drives oneself. Choosing what is important in one's life will make things achievable. There is priority to the point that such priority takes over the other things. Having a husband, family, children, birth, and housekeeping was my priority as what constitutes a happy life as an African women. As such, pregnancy or childbirth were not obstacles, but challenges to me. Away from family, parent, and friend, I managed my three babies and defended my PhD. As such, pregnancy, childbirth, etc. are not incompatible if the institution and close family are supportive. Another important aspect is the value that is shared in the family. As such, I can

say that a woman like myself breaches a lot to get there, and there are options. We need to understand these options and accompany girls and women consequently. Stereotyping and pre-concept about suitability of leadership position for a woman is beyond her personal control as this depends on her social construction and facts.

Figure 3: Representation of autobiographic career itinerary



Discussion why GDO within the AMRC is Important

I have gone through many steps and different circumstances that led me to where I am now. In terms of institutional support, there was little support with huge impact that I benefited from my university (the University of Nottingham, UK) through childcare and space. The huge support from my husband, who believed in me and encouraged me throughout, has been very important up to now.

Up to now in Burkina Faso, there is the need to undertake an in-depth research to inform strategic and policy level actors on this issue related to gender in academia. Key aspects to consider is to encourage girls to go for high level degree, by giving them opportunities and examples. There is a need to put in place a platform to help girls incorporate pregnancy and childbirth, not as handicap/obstacles but as part of their challenging lives. Nowadays, scholarship institutions need to continue providing the flexibility to women who

choose to combine pregnancy and study, and above all, put in place within university a mentoring team that young women can usually get inspiration from.

Understanding the philosophy of a good life can embrace how women can have both a family and a career as a scientist. Making great successful woman known to young girls and initiate mentoring for women who chose Science as a career is important. The glass ceiling for women in science is a reality (motherhood, family life, lack of an understanding and a supportive partner etc.). The new move with Gender and Diversity at the African Multiple Research Centers initiative is highly appreciated and is going to make all the difference.

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