

INVISIBLE WOMEN



Ha Joon Chang is a renowned economist from South Korea. In his book, 23 Things They Don't Tell You About Capitalism, he writes that the invention of the washing machine transformed more lives than the internet. I know he is writing about women in the West and not here in Liberia where wooden washboards are still very common, and many, many people still wash clothes by beating them on a rock.

I often think about that analogy whenever I have to deal with modern institutions, our development partners and other friendly folks. “How many farmers do you work with?” And by the time I start trying to answer that one, comes the next: “...and how many of your farmers are

women?”

In my heart I want to say “We are still waiting for the washing machines” but I usually just start with “It’s complicated”. And believe me, while I understand the need for gender disaggregation and all the plenty reports that will emanate from answers to these questions, the truth is that it *is* complicated. Intuitively I know that most of rice farming is done by women, but I can’t prove it because my documents always show so-so men. I go to workshops about rice, and they are dominated by men; what women I see are seldom rice farmers, and in any case they rarely speak up.

So my experiences yesterday were enlightening.

For several months now, I have been following more closely our interactions and relationships with rice farmers. And recently, we dipped our toes in supporting some of them with cash and inputs. Yesterday, we had appointments to visit the farms of two farmers that want to join FABRAR’s support system. I will call them Peter and Sackie, since I didn’t ask them to share their story with y’all.

{NOTE: The real Peter and Sackie were two rice agents that made off with FABRAR’s money last year, supposedly to buy rice from small holder farmers;

after several buy-sell cycles, the bounders disappeared. Turned out they are languishing in jail somewhere for having juked too many farmers on the other end. I don't care if they care that I use their names, but let me not digress.}

So we go off to see Peter's farm...way behind Bong Mines. I mean wayyyy behind Bong Mines! In fact, we crossed through the iron ore mining concession in Bong County and wound up back in Margibi but through some back road that is probably close to Weala. A scenic drive, to be sure, seeing the relics of Liberia's past prosperity lying in ruins; and seeing the lush, untapped potential in the land...but I digress again.

We get to this farm and it is easily 35 or 40 acres; maybe more.

"Wow!" I think. "He wasn't playin' that he has a large rice farm!" Because this is huge for a one-person farm.

Peter comes towards me and proudly introduces his mother, Martha.

"When I decided to farm", he explains, "I called my mother and she got the women together and she did it for me."

I shake Martha's hand and tell her thank you for this large farm, all the while I am wondering how on earth she could have done all this herself.

And as we tour the farm I am more astounded. Martha has planted rice and I can see the stalks are about a foot and a half tall. Martha has also planted peanuts, benne seed, palava sauce, pumpkin, cassava, corn, pepper...and she points out the rubber saplings in there. The 2,000 rubber saplings were planted by Peter himself though, not her.

"Hay own, dah nah jess nah biznay," she says with a smile. Peter's rubber crop will not give returns soon, she means. Peter teases her back about planting all these vegetables in the rice farm, and she quickly points out that whenever he needed money for school fees or whatever, she'd harvest some of the vegetables to send him quick cash. The rice was her main source of farm revenue and the proceeds were there for big expenses; but the vegetables were ready money for daily needs and for emergencies.

Interesting system she has here. With so much inter-cropping in a not-so-discernible pattern, I know it's going to wreak havoc with my data sets on farm yields for rice, but the fact is that she has short-, medium- and long-term revenue streams. The trade off of high yields for steady income.

Then she explains how she does such a large area herself. She actually doesn't. She uses the *kuu* system. A *kuu* is a group of [usually] women

numbering around 20 or 30 persons, depending on the task. Members of a *kuu* trade labor in much the same way as the round-robin *suusuu* clubs do. So she calls on the *kuu* members whenever she has a large task like clearing, planting, weeding and harvesting. And she obligates herself to respond to their calls for help when they need it. But for the rice farm, she said that she “bought” a *kuu*...meaning she hired the *kuu* group to clear the farm, lay it out, plant it, tend it and eventually harvest the produce.

I think of my data sets again. Lawdy! So instead of the one male farmer that I have on paper, I have a female head farmer and 20-30 farm workers. And nearly every one of them is a woman. Because I can't say that Martha is the only farmer I am dealing with...Martha has a *kuu-worth* of women also farming by her side.

At this point, I'm reminded of another book that I read for my graduate studies: “Whose Reality Counts?” by Robert Chambers. Chambers opines:

“In many countries, urban and rural people alike have shown an astonishing ability to express and analyze their local, complex and diverse realities which are often at odds with the top-down realities imposed by professionals.”

Peter the farmer tells me that he has a diploma in agriculture and a BSc in Biology and Chemistry. However, he says, *“When it comes to farming, I call my mother.”*

Astonishing, for true.

We go on to Sackie's farm, which is near Todee. Montserrado County this time, but close to Gbarpolu border. And there is another enormous farm planted with rice...and rubber, and corn, and cassava, and fever tea leaf, and pepper...same as the other. Sackie's elder brother Flomo walks up...it turns out that we have some way back extended family connections. Sackie and Flomo proudly introduce their elder sister Mary. *“She did all of this,”* they say, pointing to the farm.

Like Martha at the other farm, Mary is well-spoken and highly knowledgeable about all the technicalities of the farm and the produce on there. She is deferred to by her brothers and that is interesting to watch. Mary also uses the *kuu* system -other women- whenever she needs farm labor. We start to talk about commercializing agriculture and running the farms for profit. I see Mary's eyes following avidly, but she doesn't say anything. It is her brothers who do the talking when it's about money. As it was with Peter and his mother. Come to think of it, I've never been to a rice farm and not seen women in the fields while the men accompany us to describe and explain farming.

There are other aspects to this. I remember the words of Mme. Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, Chairperson of the African Union during it's 50th anniversary: *"If we want to transform African agriculture, we have to replace the hand-held hoe!"* But as far as I can see, all machinery on the farm is handled by men...so by mechanizing the farms, in our march towards commercialization, we would be replacing women's manual labor with male-operated machines; replacing women's income, with those of the men. At the same time, I see the visible difference of farms cleared by men and farms cleared by women.

Before we leave, we pose for a photo...the women don't join us.

I am thinking about this post as we leave the farms and head back to Monrovia. How do I present what I have seen? How can I do justice to these strong, vibrant, intelligent women who carry agriculture on their backs but are so rarely seen or heard from? How can I ensure that the partnerships we develop between FABRAR and their entities, *really* include women and support their realities on their terms?

Postscript: Five years on, and a stint as a female Minister of Agriculture in between, the role of women in food systems in Liberia, from seeds to plate, is much more visible. Policies and programs to support women and their roles have been put in place with intentionality. #NoTurningBack

