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Transporting cocoa seedlings to the field for transplanting.
Photo: Abraham Mbikozunga

Agroforestry and changing power relationships, Bafwasende, DRC

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Introduction

“These women are surpassing us, men, in good initiatives; they didn’t ask us for anything and aren’t expecting anything from us to do what they’re doing...”

A traditional leader

Agriculture is the main economic activity in African rural areas. It is characterized by a gendered division of labour. Men clear the fields and grow cash crops; women take care of weeding, harvesting and growing food, and market garden crops (Apusigah, 2009; Ferraton and Touzard, 2009). This labour division based on gender stems from multiple factors, including cultural and social beliefs. Certain cultures and traditions, mainly patriarchal ones which consider the man the leader of the woman, tend to limit women’s access to land and assign agricultural tasks deemed to require more physical effort (clearing, etc.) to men (Ogunlela and Mukhtar, 2009).

This division of labour between men and women in agriculture reflects the fundamental power relationships in the community and affirms men's hegemony, which was reinforced and even exacerbated by the Belgian colonial system, Christianity, legislation and the rent economy.

This resulted in a division of activities between the Europeans, the settlers and the colonized native peoples. The colonized native peoples were responsible for food crops, while the colonizers exclusively grew industrial crops such as cotton (*Gossypium* sp.), rubber (*Hevea brasiliensis*), oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis*), cocoa (*Theobroma cacao*) and coffee (*Coffea* sp.); see Omasombo Tshonda (2020). Perpetuating this colonial legacy, men are reinforced in their patriarchal attitudes and believe that they are the only ones capable of perennial crops and agroforestry.

These social prejudices define the types of power relationships between men and women and are conveyed and internalized through socialization. Some women resign themselves to these prejudices. Women sometimes feel they have no choice except to participate in perpetuating thought patterns and power relationships that disadvantage them, particularly in economic matters with a gendered division of labour. Treated as auxiliaries, women receive a pittance, even though they contribute greatly to the survival of families, especially in agriculture (Maindo et al., 2024). They sink into poverty and precarity,

especially since in most cases their work is unpaid (Raney et al., 2011; Poggi and Waltmann, 2019). They take care of children and elderly parents, sometimes alone, because some husbands leave the villages in search of a better life in the city or in the mining areas.

The national strategy on community forestry promotes inclusive governance of forests in the DRC. This can boost local entrepreneurship, with the goal of improving the livelihoods of forest-dependent peoples. The development of inclusive entrepreneurship could either improve or worsen the relationships between men and women, or reconfigure them. This is the case of the Working Landscapes Programme, Eastern REDD+ and Protection and Conservation of Water and Forest Resources programme, all focused on community forestry in Bafwasende. These programmes promote cocoa-based agroforestry in support of small-scale forest and agricultural producers: men and women. Such efforts may have an impact on the relationships between men and women. This article analyzes the impact of women's involvement in cocoa-based agroforestry on power relationships in the Bafwasende landscape.

Methodology

The study that this article discusses was carried out in the Bafwasende landscape with communities engaged in



Capacity-building in women's entrepreneurship, Bafwazana village. Photo: Théophile Yuma

community forestry. It aimed to improve their livelihoods through providing secure land tenure on forests held by virtue of custom. In addition to documentary research (activity, monitoring and mission reports and Tropenbos DRC archives), data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 52 women involved in agroforestry and four focus groups of 10 to 14 men each. The interviews focused on field acquisition, clearing and maintenance, cultural constraints, profit sharing, etc. The data were processed using statistical analysis to generate graphs and content analysis that explain the observations.

Women's involvement in agroforestry

In the Bafwasende landscape, many people consider the woman as inferior to the man, to whom she should submit. Women face many constraints in Bafwasende's landscape, according to the field investigations.

The weight of traditions and prejudices

Traditions, beliefs and prejudices are among the constraints that hinder women's efforts in agroforestry and affect representation, attitudes and behaviours. These beliefs form a system of values that govern the experiences and thinking of men and women (Maindo et al., 2020).

Restrictive rules

According to the account of certain traditional leaders, a Bafwasende woman's status condemns her to a perpetual ranking that deprives her of land ownership, because land is seen as belonging to the man. A single woman would benefit from the land of her father and/or her brothers only if she is not married or remarried. She would lose her rights to the land of her family by getting married; this is considered as preventing her in-laws from taking advantage of these rights to the detriment of her own family.

Financial and material constraints

Banking coverage in the DRC is very scarce; there are few banks or microcredit institutions. Even if there were any, few women can obtain credit because the bank's conditions are very demanding in terms of repayment guarantees, particularly for real estate (Maindo and Ibanda, 2020).

A disabling educational deficit

The national literacy rate of 77.3% hides disparities between genders and between geographical areas or regions (PNUD, 2017). The territory of Bafwasende is the least literate in the country due to the small number of schools and their distance from villages, and it suffers terribly from this lack of education. Women are the most affected by this problem.

All these constraints are cumulative. The status and role of a woman in this context are proportional to the number of constraints which weigh on her or from which she has freed herself.

Agroforestry women: varied profiles, common destiny

Despite these obstacles, some women have taken up agroforestry, an activity usually carried out by men. These women have very diverse profiles in terms of age, marital status, level of education, professional experience, household size, etc. But their common goal remains to defy social and economic constraints by practising agroforestry. Of 52 women involved in agroforestry interviewed in the Bafwasende territory, 35 are married, seven are divorced, five are single and five are widowed.

Before the programmes began there were no women practising agroforestry or growing perennial crops in the Bafwasende landscape, but there has been an unprecedented engagement of married women in agroforestry (67% of the women surveyed were married). Faced with an increase in household costs, the low profitability of some men's activities (mining, hunting), and the high mobility of men, who leave in search of remunerative employment in cities, women are using agroforestry as an opportunity to contribute to the survival of their households. According to the project's interviews with women, thanks to this participation in agroforestry, they have become increasingly independent.

Of the sample of 52 cocoa plantations, 25 belong exclusively to women and 27 to couples (Figure 1). This increases the social status of women and reflects a shift in power within households and society in their favour. Few single women are engaged in agroforestry as a strategy, so as not to reduce their chances of getting married in a society where an unmarried woman is not looked on favourably.

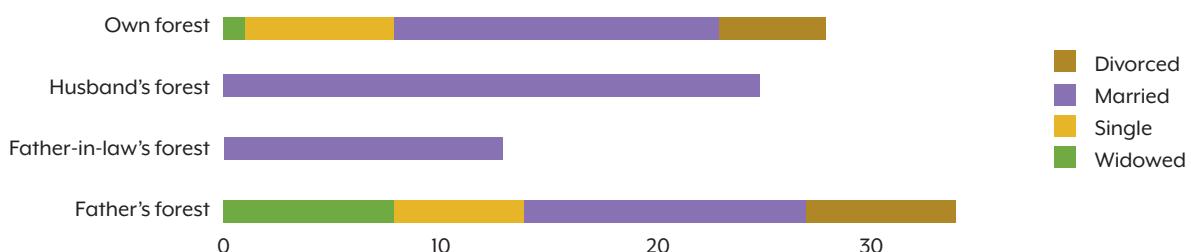


Figure 1. Ownership of forest areas according to the marital status of women

Of the 35 spouses, 24 carry out farming as their main activity, six farm as a secondary activity (because they have another main job), and six do not farm.

The average cocoa plantation area is estimated at 2.5 ha.

Women are increasingly freeing themselves from dependence on land ownership: 27% have acquired their own concessions, but 38% and 35% respectively work on the lands of their husbands or in-laws or their own families. While it was traditionally unthinkable for a woman to have her own land concession, this group of women land-owners, although still small, reflects the shift in power over land.

Intervention strategies and power relationships

Involving, collaborating, diversifying

Women, like other groups such as youth and Indigenous peoples (Pygmies) had always been subject to various restrictions against participating in decision-making, ownership of and access to forest land, etc. (Maindo et al., 2020). The community forestry initiative offered them significant opportunities to break out of the traditional rut to carry out activities formerly monopolized by men.

Overcoming assumptions about jobs reserved for men

Clearing work (field preparation) and field maintenance (perennial crops) require great physical effort. Traditionally, there was a belief that these tasks must be carried out by men. This myth, along with the realities of colonial relations (cash crops for the colonists and food crops for the colonized), reinforced the gendered division of labour in agriculture. The women involved in cocoa agroforestry have been able to circumvent these stereotypes, however (Figure 2).

Because the work of clearing and maintaining agroforestry fields requires a great deal of physical exertion, women traditionally depended entirely on their husbands to carry out these tasks. To overcome this dependence, 57% of the women surveyed recruit local labour or join forces with other women in tontines (cooperatives) to clear the land and 21.5% clear land with their husbands; only 21.5% leave this responsibility to their husbands. For maintenance tasks, 46% of women organize themselves alone or in tontines, 33% involve their husbands in this work, and 10% recruit local labour; only 11% leave this responsibility to their husbands.

Diversifying income-generating activities to support agroforestry

Aware of their lack of means to finance their activities, women have mobilized their will and the knowledge received from various training courses from Tropenbos DRC to materialize their desire to fight poverty.

All the women surveyed combine food and perennial crops and fruit trees in agroforestry plantations, thanks to support from the programmes carried out by Tropenbos DRC.

In addition to agriculture and agroforestry, some women carry out other income-generating activities (IGAs) such as rattan handicrafts, the manufacture of traditional alcohol, and the collection of non-timber forest products (NTFPs). They are also developing collective initiatives such as women's associations with a focus on IGAs. To shorten the time required for clearing or maintenance by one person, tontines and other associations are mobilized for mutual assistance to women in agroforestry. Women from Bafwapada have also created fish ponds and set up an association aimed at supporting women's initiatives in agriculture, fishing, collecting NTFPs and small businesses. Far from being a simple mutual aid initiative, this social engineering implemented by women

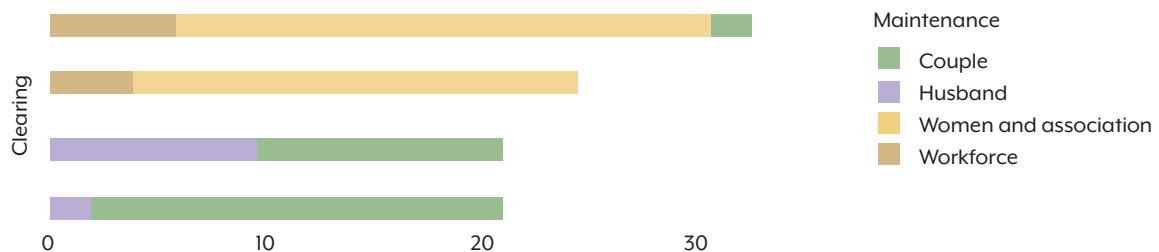


Figure 2. Women's strategies to carry out field clearing and maintenance

to practise agroforestry frees them from local dependence on individual work. It also allows them to participate in productive activities from which they were previously excluded. In addition, it provides employment for men, who are used as local labour; this helps to overcome attitudes that underestimate women and allows women to negotiate on equal terms with men.

In this landscape, the inventiveness of women sometimes surprises men. marvel at the women's prowess and encourage them to thrive. A traditional leader said: *“These women are surpassing us, men, in good initiatives; they didn't ask us for anything and aren't expecting anything from us to do what they're doing. They're astonishing us...”* Some people even think that the frequency of divorce decreases once women start to engage in agroforestry.

Integration of women into management bodies

During the establishment of the governance bodies of the Forestry Concessions for Local Communities (CFCLs), women did not remain powerless. They managed to gain representation within the management groups that pilot the 12 CFCLs already in place. Each CFCL has the following bodies: community assembly, local management committee, monitoring and control committee, and council of elders. Of the 306 elected members, there are 70 women; they represent 23% of the total. Women have their greatest representation within the local management committees, with 31% of the total. This committee plans and executes all daily activities; it comes into contact with all partners. In one of the forest concessions, a woman presides over the community assembly and in another a woman leads the local management committee.



Harvesting cocoa, Bafwapada village. Photo: Meschac Koy

Power relationships and profit sharing

Women assuming responsibilities in CFCLs management bodies and diversifying their sources of income disrupts the traditional balance of power and generates tensions. The women leave the interior courtyard of their household and gradually settle next to a man in the exterior courtyard (*barza*). This change does not occur without discomfort on the part of these actors. Some men still remain reluctant about the community forestry programme because it requires the presence of women at all levels. However, the support of relatives (brothers, children, parents and even spouses) has so far made it possible to avoid a clash in gender relations. A large number of women, however, still hold back. Some of them still fear leaving their traditional role. For them, certain activities and responsibilities are “masculine.” They do not speak in public.



Transporting cocoa seedlings for transplanting, Bafwasende Landscape, DRC. Photo: Abraham Mbikozunga

Involvement in the programmes has allowed many women to unleash their potential and their strength. Some men accept that women will participate in these activities. Women's significant participation (31%) within the CFCLs local management committees helps to restructure power relationships between men and women within the landscape.

Increasingly, women involved in agroforestry are also improving their participation in income sharing. During the interviews, some reported controlling between 40% and 80% of the earnings from their cocoa plantations, which improves their level of influence over income management in the household. But, it is currently difficult to determine the share that actually goes to the woman compared to other family members due to the difficulty of deciding whether the share that women receive is a gift by their husbands or a right of remuneration for the service provided.

Conclusion

Agroforestry has become a powerful lever for transforming power relationships in the landscape of Bafwasende. Many women have found in it a way to improve the livelihoods of their households; it also gives them more power and economic autonomy. This shift in power sometimes generates tensions between men and women in this fundamentally patriarchal society. The weakening of the role of men through impoverishment, and the absence of employment opportunities, also favours this progressive change in power relationships between men and women. In this struggle for survival, women in agroforestry have thus managed to acquire a significant share of power in society. The Bafwasende landscape is faced with poor living conditions, precarity and poverty due to several factors. If conditions continue to deteriorate, it can be expected that more women will become involved in agroforestry and will continue to challenge or even reverse the balance of power.

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