

# Nature and Trends of Rural Women's Labour in Subsistence Agriculture During Colonial Period in Samia, Western Kenya

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**Abstract:** While studies indicate that agriculture is the main source of income for rural households and the main occupation for women, it has been hypothesized that development process in rural areas has marginalized women in the agricultural sector, reducing their productivity and control over resources. This paper examines women's labour conditions in subsistence agriculture in Samia for which limited studies have been conducted. The study investigates the nature and trends of rural women's labour in subsistence agriculture in Samia during the colonial period. Discussions in this paper are guided by gendered theory with specific focus on women's involvement in subsistence agriculture in Samia and the responses of Samia women in their endeavour to produce food during the period of study. The study was conducted in two wards in Samia sub-county, namely Ageng'a/Nanguba and Namboboto/Nambuku through descriptive survey design. Based on this design, interviews were conducted to a sampled population and the respondents were selected purposively in 10 sub-locations that were selected randomly. Findings of this paper are drawn from research carried out among peasant farmers, elderly men and women of ages 60 and above, youths of both gender, women groups involved in subsistence farming, Sub-county agricultural officer, agricultural extension officers, assistant chiefs and Members of County Assembly in Samia Sub-county. Thus, a total of 379 informants were interviewed. The study relied on, semi structured interviews, in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions to obtain primary data. Other data sources such as archives were used to obtain relevant information. Secondary information was collected through review of books, journals, internet, dissertations, theses and government records. To exhaustively analyze the history of rural women's labour in subsistence agriculture in Samia, qualitative analysis of data was done using thematic and content analysis to develop comprehensive description of data under study. The study established that farm labour during the colonial period was differentiated by gender and type of commodity produced. In this way, men were mainly responsible for the production of cash crops like Rice, Sugarcane and groundnuts whereas women were primarily involved in the production of subsistence food crops such as maize, beans, cassava and millet. Nevertheless, the study noted that there was an increase in women participation in subsistence farming during the British Colonial rule in Samia as a result of male migrant labour; the number of men leaving subsistence farming steadily increased. Based on the results of the findings, the study constitutes an important body of knowledge for policy formulation in agriculture in addressing issues affecting women in agricultural production and also for scholars in identifying the gaps that have not been filled in their studies.

**Keywords:** Rural Women, Labour, Subsistence Agriculture, Samia Sub-County, Colonial Period.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

This article examines the nature and trends of rural women's labour in subsistence agriculture during the colonial period. The period witnessed the establishment of British imperialism through the Imperial British East Africa Company (IBEAC), which had been given a charter by the British government. Though the company did not manage to put in place an administrative set-up, it paved way for the establishment of British colonial government. Subsistence farming in Western Kenya during the colonial period saw the family being regarded as the unit of production [45]. This means the

production process was organized according to the specific needs of the family based on its own resources. The family mainly relied on its own labour pool which served as a reservoir of labour that could be mobilized and utilized for specific subsistence activities [40]. Family labour could be provided by either man, as heads of families, women or children who had attained a specific age. The basic type of labour that was readily provided was farm labour. Farm labour during this period was differentiated by gender, age and type of production [17]. Men were mainly responsible for cash crop and livestock production whereas women were primarily involved in food crop production [71]. The major food crops produced in the region were maize, beans, sorghum, sweet potatoes, cassava and millet. During the pre-colonial period, women's contribution to subsistence farming and herding was substantial, and there was considerable evidence that this contribution increased during the period of British colonial rule as the number of men leaving subsistence farming steadily increased [28]. Prior to World War II, the few women who engaged in formal wage employment worked largely in agriculture, as children's nurses and in the towns as prostitutes and beer brewers [63]. In traditional African societies, labour was allocated to household members according to age and sex. For instance, "Man with his superior physical strength, could both undertake the more strenuous tasks such as lumbering, mining, quarrying, land clearing and house building [53]. Not handicapped as women by the physiological burdens of pregnancy and nursing, he could fish, herd and trade. However, the woman was at no disadvantage in lighter tasks, which could be performed in or near the home, such as the gathering of vegetable products, the fetching of water, the preparation of food and the manufacture of utensils which were equally important. This provided gender variable which was a salient feature in household division of labour and allocation. Furthermore, during the colonial period, intercropping was practiced beyond one or two traditional crops monoculture [8]. Fruits, vegetables and livestock were not part of diversification programs, which required less labour for crop production. Such types of farming were very appropriate for small-scale producers [81]. The advantage of subsistence farming was that nutrition was improved. However, the need to properly diversify food crop production among the rural women in Kenya would require a whole new set of technology, particularly with respect to marketing and food processing [68]. This could not be adopted during colonial period since technological changes were minimal.

## II. RESEARCH METHODS AND MATERIALS

The study was conducted through descriptive survey design to explain and explore the historical involvement of women in subsistence agriculture in Samia. Descriptive research enables collection of information through interviews to a sample of individuals hence suitable for extensive research [61].

The research was conducted in Samia Sub-county, Busia County in the Western region of Kenya. According to Busia County Integrated Development Plan 2013-2017 as projected by KNBS, the estimated population of Samia Sub-county by 2017 was 119,817 [44]. Samia borders Budalangi constituency to the North, Butula constituency to the South and Matayos constituency to the East. The Sub - County has four wards namely, Ageng'a/Nanguba ward, Bwiri Ward, Nangina ward and Namboboto/Nambuku ward. Samia Sub-county lies just east and north of Lake Victoria. Elevation in the area varies from 3,600 feet at the lake to 5,000 feet in Samia hills. Rainfall is 30 to 40 inches annually. According to the Integrated Rural Survey of Kenya (1974-1975), small farms dominate the agricultural structure in the study area. Among the major commodities produced in Samia were; cotton, sorghum, millet, maize, cassava, rice, sugarcane plantations, vegetable and small holder livestock and poultry farming. Cassava and millet formed the principal food crops due to their drought resistance, although sorghum, sweet potato, cowpeas, beans and maize were frequently seen as well. Sesame and groundnuts were produced as cash crops. Samia Sub-county is drier than areas further in land from the lake. The Sub-county was chosen because the history on rural women's labour in subsistence agriculture in the area had previously not been adequately addressed in the scholarship.

The target population for this study was 35,515 respondents drawn from 10 sub-locations in the two wards. This comprised of peasant farmers, elders both men and women of ages 60 and above, youths of both gender, women groups involved in subsistence farming, Sub-county agricultural officers, agricultural extension officers, assistant chiefs and Members of County Assembly in Samia Sub-county.

Sampling involves the process of selecting part of the total population of the study [42]. Both probability and non-probability sampling methods were used to collect data, thus, simple random and purposive methods of sampling were employed. Two wards were selected purposively namely; Namboboto/Nambuku and Ageng'a/Nanguba because they had the largest population among the four wards in Samia and because of high level of involvement in agricultural activities, particularly, food crop production. The actual inclusion of the sample was determined by random sampling in the field.

Out of the 17 sub-locations, 10 sub-locations were randomly selected, 5 from each ward respectively. From the target population of 35,515, a sample of 379 was determined using Krejcie and Morgan (1970) Table for Determining sample size.

Three methods were used in collecting data for this study. These included; semi structured interviews, in-depth interviews and focused group discussions. The main method used in collecting the primary data was that of semi structured interviews, with the research instruments consisting of varied questions. The Interview guides were administered with the help of two research assistants. The guides were also used to collect more detailed information from different groups of respondents who formed part of the Key Informant interviews from the sub-locations. Ten Assistant Chiefs, 1 Sub-county agricultural officer, 5 Sub-county agricultural extension officers, 6 officials of women groups involved in agric business, elders both men and women of ages 60 and above, youths of both gender and 2 Members of County Assembly were also sampled as key informants. The In-depth interviews were thus used for questions that needed probing by the researcher and more explanation from the respondent. Focused group discussions were used to further clarify information that may not have been adequately addressed in the semi structured interviews. A total of 2 groups, one from each of the wards of study were selected to participate in the discussions. The discussions focused on the general overview of the history of women's labour in subsistence farming in Samia. The study conducted 2 FGD Sessions, one for each ward consisting of two representatives from each sub-location. Sampling was done for two officials of registered women groups from the two wards that were involved in peasant farming. Three women groups from Ageng'a/Nanguba and 2 women groups from Namboboto/Nambuku were involved in subsistence agriculture and were considered useful for this study. From the selected women groups, only two officials, chairperson and secretary were selected for FGD; therefore Ageng'a/Nanguba had 16 participants consisting of 2 representatives from five sub-locations and 2 representatives from each women group. Namboboto/Nambuku had 14 participants in the FGD session consisting of 2 representatives from five sub-locations and 1 representative from each women group.

Camera, tape recorder, pens and notebooks were used in the field for recording data. In addition, secondary data were obtained from books, journals, internet, dissertations, theses and government records. The Kenya National Archives was instrumental in providing some of the necessary primary information.

Qualitative data was analyzed using content analysis method by developing and organizing the data into thematic areas with respect to the study objective. Field notes and electronically recorded data were analyzed qualitatively establishing links with respective research questions they answered. Secondary data were used to broaden the scope of the explanations and conclusions made in this work.

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

#### **Agricultural Division of Labour between Men and Women in Samia:**

Studies of the traditional division of labour between sexes in Luhya groups have demonstrated that women's actual contribution to subsistence farming during the colonial period was great [46]. Such contribution was immeasurably larger than her inferior social status could indicate. A heavy share of the subsistence work fell on women among the Luhya since women did the greater and more strenuous part of the garden labour. In addition, women were always available at home to attend to farming activities unlike their male counter parts who were sometimes out from the home or busy attending to other activities unrelated to food crop production [58]. Ojiambo, oral interviewer argued that:

*In addition to farming activities, trade was another valuable economic activity during the colonial period that both women and men practiced. The economic activities involved marketing particular products, that is, women could sell pots, products grown in kitchen gardens, dried fish, fruits, and grains bought from farmers in other regions. Men mainly took their animals for sale to the market (Ojiambo, O.I, 2017).*

Apart from trade activities, men and women shared other responsibilities in different ways. For instance, in relation to house building and maintenance; Abasamia perfected on labour specialization. Men had sole responsibility of building houses while women resumed the duty of maintaining their houses. The economic organization among the Abasamia community was evident in the division of labour [11]. Basically, house building had many stages, each with a division of labour. For instance, women generally repaired walls and floors, whereas men prepared thatching materials [11]. Similarly, children played a critical role in terms of contributing to subsistence farming [23]. For example, girls mainly offered their labour support in the home and fields while boys mainly offered their labour support in terms of herding

livestock such as grazing and watering them [75]. Boys and girls helped out with other tasks, such as tending younger children, gathering firewood, and fetching water. Girls had other extra duties, which included helping their mothers in selling trade commodities [75]. Division of labour by sex has been characteristic of all societies but there is no consensus about the source or origin of sexual division of labour [23]. The study further illustrated that, sexual division of labour originated from natural or biological differences between male and female persons during the colonial period in Samia. According to responses from the study, division of labour in Samia was a pure and simple outgrowth of nature; it existed only between two sexes. For instance, men went to war, hunted, fished, and provided other raw materials for food [3]. Women on the other hand, cared for the house, prepared food and clothing [47]. They cooked, weaved and sewed. Each was master of his or her own field of activity. This view has been articulated by structuralisms' theory of origin of sexual division of labour propagated and expatiated upon by different scholars in different disciplines [72]. It is based on the belief that biological differences affect women and men's physiological functions in relation to the psyche, body, intellect and sensuality. They argued that male and female sexual characteristics start right from the embryonic stage, which is exhibited, in almost every physical variable and increases with maturation [13]. These biological and physical differences invariably affect men and women's sexual roles in the society. Women subordination was seen as a universal phenomenon that was manifested at two levels: nature/biology, social/ patriarchal male authority and subordination to male figures (father, uncles, and nephews) within the families. This is because cultural practices differed in the way tasks were allocated to men and women [19]. Sexual roles differed in different societies according to the degree of women involvement in the economic and political life; the degree to which men were allowed to be involved in domestic duties and the primary task of men and women in different spheres such as agriculture. Eduwa, in an oral interview noted that:

*Samia women played an integral role in societies, during the colonial period. They were responsible for the upkeep of the household, agriculture, reproduction, rearing and discipline of the children. Therefore, they consistently shaped the cultures and Samia as a society. To a significant extent, they were responsible for finding water, sowing seeds, tilling, harvesting, caring for the animals, keeping the home in order, feeding the family, caring for the children and so on (Eduwa, O. I, 2017).*

This response was similar to the Levines report for the Gusii in 1955-57 [57] which stated that though in the past women and middle-aged men worked in the fields, young men herded cattle. The movement of men into wage labour meant that children now herded cattle, while women were burdened more than ever with agricultural activities, in addition to their domestic chores. Women did all the milking, although traditionally, they were not even permitted to enter the cattle villages. Men, when they were at home, carried out the non-routine tasks of agriculture such as clearing bush, ploughing and building fences, houses and granaries, but women did all the hoeing, sowing, weeding and harvesting. Weeding, a difficult and time consuming task was done exclusively by women [73]. Women were responsible for weeding, post-harvest production, and food preparation. Women were responsible for transporting and marketing the cash crops with male members of the household. Similarly, other studies in Kenya in the 1980s reported that women were mainly responsible for ploughing, harvesting and transporting the crops while men were responsible for building the granary [29]. However, gradually the distinction between men's and women's tasks became quite blurred. There were very few tasks that were done exclusively by men like clearing of field. Women performed all the tasks on their plots from sowing, weeding to harvesting [63]. They could get some assistance from men in clearing and preparing the land for cultivation. In addition, women in developing countries were often considered responsible for feeding the family [12], where wives and husbands kept separate fields as was frequently seen in Africa. Men traditionally had more options for moving into cash cropping on their own fields and leaving the production of subsistence crops to their wives [14]. With this increased responsibility for family subsistence, women often did not have adequate land, labour and time to produce their own cash crops. Furthermore, in most cases, wives worked as unpaid family labourers in their husband's cash crop fields. Men were not necessarily under any obligation to share the proceeds from their fields with their wives [43].

#### **Impact of Colonial penetration in Samia on organization of labour:**

When colonialists moved into the area, they took over the land that had been cared for and cultivated by Samia women [4]. Samia women were suddenly alienated from what had, for so long, defined them and their role in society. This had huge impacts on their economic situation, as well as, their access to food. More than this, it also made these women more dependent on men in the society, which led to a sense of male supremacy and dominance (social, physical and emotional), and making their female counterparts to feel more inferior most of the time [69]. The impact of colonialism in Samia was greatly felt by women as argued by Bwire (Agricultural Extension Officer) below:

*A major effect of colonialism on women in Busia and among the Abasamia community was the introduction of wage labour. By the virtue that they were undermined by the men, they could be easily released by men to work, do other forms of labour since they were not strong enough to resist. This meant that the women (and children) of a village or community were forced to leave their daily duties in order to work for European farmers, particularly during the peak seasons (Bwire, O.I, 2017).*

Another challenge that colonial government imposed on women was deprivation of women's roles in advancing agricultural development and food security since their contribution was undervalued. They were neglected in the making of agricultural policies [59]. This reduced women's position, which made them to have low decision making power. In addition, the women farmers' access to agricultural extension services during the colonial period was limited. Among different challenges, which hindered women's access to agricultural extension services were cultural constraints, low literacy levels among women, non-availability of female extension staff in agricultural extension departments, lack of local women organizations, violence against women, less control over resources, social structure and limited access to market information, mobility and lack of self-confidence [76]. The colonial control of land meant limited access to available terrain, which implied that women had less diversity in terms of the types of soils available and the crops that could be cultivated [49]. The amount of land made available to them was drastically less than before, limiting their agricultural yield significantly. The establishment of commercialized agriculture contributed to the loss of women's economic power [48]. In Africa, land registration began during the colonial era, which led to the granting of land titles deeds. Consequently, the effect was transfer of farm land that had been controlled by women to male ownership [49]. In addition, as families moved from subsistence (family consumption) agriculture to commercial agriculture and as commercial plantations were developed by foreigners, men were more prone to do the farming unlike before. The commercialization of agriculture also made farmers more dependent on the state for credit and technical training [6]. In the colonial period and in the early decades of independence, women found themselves frozen out of such aid [66]. Mang'eni (Agricultural Officer) in an interview, argued that:

*The status of women in colonial period varied greatly and the impact of European colonialism was mainly to reverse or further diminish their position in society. For example, due to introduction of mechanization, most men participated in farming activities unlike before when women greatly participated in food crop farming. Presence of colonial masters only meant an application of excessive force and this disadvantaged women greatly. Through this, most women were subjected to forceful labour, hence to a low degree participated in growing food crops. (Mang'eni, O.I, 2017).*

Colonial penetration resulted to forceful integration of Abaluhya societies into the expanding global capitalist economy dominated by the European powers [52]. To extract the mineral and commodity wealth of Africa and to ensure a cheap labour supply, radical changes were imposed [52]. The commercialization of agriculture through the introduction of cash crops altered the customary gender division of labour in ways that were mostly disadvantageous to women [15]. Men were taught to grow new cash crops such as cocoa and coffee for export, while women continued to grow food crops for the family and local consumption [15]. Men were forced into the wage economy to work in the mines, on the plantations, or in towns; most women remained in the rural areas [31]. Schooling and the teaching of new skills were made available primarily to males. All in all, although both men and women were exploited within the colonial economy, men gained some access to important resources such as money, skills, land, and education compared to women. Men gained political advantages as customary sources of female power were ignored or undermined [74]. Europeans imposed their own prejudices about the proper authority of men over women by dealing only with male leaders. All-male native authorities were created in many areas to allow for some local government based on frequently arguable "traditional" or customary laws (KNA/PC/NZA3/21/1/2 1928). Lastly, the colonial government positively contributed to development of agriculture or farming activities among the rural communities during the colonial era [53]. At least in the period from 1955 to 1975, external intervention in agricultural production was pervasive and influential. This resulted to an increase in the level of income to very large sections of the population. Surprisingly, some had been left out, while some had been impoverished, but the overall effect had been to improve the conditions of most of the population. This was achieved not so much because external intervention was better designed or differently motivated than elsewhere, but because it took place under favourable conditions, in which the coincidence of the interests of colonial government agencies with community leaders and smallholders made possible a significant expansion of agricultural produce, most particularly by smallholders for both the local and export markets.

**Effects of male labour migration on women's participation in crop farming in Samia:**

Migrant labour had its own set of implications, many of which left wives, children and families in the unpleasant position of being left alone, worried about the men of their society [18]. The changing gender relations in the division of labour were as a result of various colonial policies. Colonial economic policy favoured the settlers and interfered with division of labour in Siaya District. Women's labour was most stretched by the colonial policies [55]. In many of the societies, the diminishing capacity of agriculture to provide for household subsistence increased the workload shouldered by women as men withdrew their labour from agriculture [16]. There was increased attention that was being given to the role of smallholder subsistence agriculture in ensuring food security of the continent; this is because some 73% of the rural population consisted of smallholder farmers [30]. This situation was further heightened by the fact that men were migrating to the urban areas in search of white-collar jobs and non-farm wages. Women, especially those in the rural areas, were involved in the production of staple foods, which were mainly consumed by the poor and which required intense labour (KNA/PC/NZA/2/20/201944-1947). Even where the advent of migrant labour at the beginning of colonial rule represented only a new and intermittent burden on the men, perhaps substituting for traditional warfare or raiding, and did not greatly affect the sexual division of work, women's contribution would still have been great [80]. This was most probably the case in at least the first decade of colonial rule in Kenya. But the number of males leaving subsistence farming steadily increased through the years, as did the average time spent in wage employment [70]. The rural areas ended up losing their farm labour especially the men who were more likely to migrate to the urban areas. Women were left to perform hard tasks that were previously performed by men. Women were left to make difficult household decisions and many though married, expressed a feeling of being a female head of the household due to the husband's absence. One of the most immediate consequences of male labour migration was the expansion in the social and economic roles of women [56]. Traditionally, women made a significant contribution in agricultural production, but increased male migration resulted in women assuming more responsibilities by taking over extra tasks that were previously regarded as male prerogative [39]. The women left behind were required to combine domestic chores with farming activities thereby intensifying their workload as commented by Okwaba below:

*In Samia Sub-county, households existed in which the male heads were away from homes either seeking wage employment or working elsewhere while women were left behind with the responsibility to taking care of the family and the farm but no authority to make major decisions (Okwaba, O.I, 2017).*

It is thus arguable that male counter parts in Samia were often migrating in search of employment in farms where they could be paid better wages. In turn, they could use the wages earned to support their family members. Unlike their women who were more often forced to provide free forced labour. Although women were working hard for the colonizers, men did not take over their domestic duties, which led to a massive decrease in their personal productivity [7]. As they were no longer cultivating their own fields and caring for their own homes, their economic situation became critical, forcing them to become more and more dependent on the European colonialists for their very survival. The African males began to leave their homelands, going to the cities and towns in search of more formal employment [60]. Respectively, women in Samia were generally less able than men to participate in economic opportunities because they had a work burden that men did not. In most societies, women were responsible for most of the household and child-rearing activities as well as rearing of small livestock, although norms differed by culture and over time. This additional work burden was unpaid and limited women's capacity to engage in income-earning activities, which often required a minimum fixed time before being profitable. Furthermore, the nature of tasks, such as caring for children and elderly household members, required women to stay near the home, thus limiting options to work for wages. Time scarcity forced many women to start-up cottage industries, such as handicrafts, which were often characterized by low returns and limited potential for expansion. The findings of the study concurred with other studies from various countries, which indicate that the diminishing capacity of agriculture to provide for household subsistence increased the workload shouldered by women as men withdrew their labour from agriculture [36]. This increased attention given to the role of smallholder subsistence agriculture in ensuring food security since some 73% of the rural population consisted of smallholder farmers. From the foregoing discussion on the effect of labour migration, it is reasonable to admit that constant labour withdrawal to serve the interests of the capitalist economy in different sectors of the colonial political economy disrupted the forms of the traditional peasant economy. Domestic forms to a large extent became constrained in the absence of energetic young men whose labours had kept the self reproduction of such forms.

**Influence of Colonial capitalist economy on subsistence labour forms in Samia:**

Capitalist agricultural production was explicitly biased against the overall development of smallholder agriculture [10]. In order to expand, the commodity sector had to have not only complete monopoly over the new political, economic and social infrastructure created by the colonial state, but also be in a position to undermine indigenous access to and control over the major resources, such as, land, labour and capital. Capitalist production dominated the product markets and systematically edged out smallholders from any form of competition. This was supported by a study conducted on the Colonial Economy in Kenya [51]. For instance, the author clearly indicated that the colonial period in Africa was one in which the expanding capitalist system of world-wide market exchange, "entailing in the core industrial economies form of production based", mainly on wage-labour, established its dominance over the pre - capitalist African economies. This process led to the evolution of a variety of peripheral - systems of production, which were oriented toward the export of commodities to larger world markets. Although sexual division of labour in the primary agricultural production system was somehow altered by the introduction of plough cultivation, which marginalized women, other critical factors with long-term consequences for gender relations shaped gender production in the region [20]. The contours of the colonial production system, which excluded women from the cash economy and the gender-based educational system introduced by missionaries were among some of the most critical determinants of persistent gender inequality in the region. Ultimately, the intersection between the colonial economic structures and gender-based education systems shaped the production parameters and nature of factor input, even when agricultural production no longer depended exclusively on plough cultivation [34]. The gender based colonial constructs and modification of gender roles had significant impact on the dynamics of gender relations with long-term consequences for gender production. Furthermore, they may explain counterfactual evidence from economic dependency models, which have found that breadwinner wives continue to perform more housework than linear dependency models, would predict [34]. In western Kenya, African migrant labour systems were applied. These involved men migrating to work in European farms, as well as commercial and industrial undertakings. Moreover, there were squatter or residents forced to move to provide labour on European estates and independent peasant cash-crop production [28]. These systems were within the new capitalist order, yet they incorporated and depended upon the subsistence labour still performed by many Samia community locals. Over time, there emerged from the migrant labour system a stratum of full-time wage labourers deriving nearly the whole of their livelihood from wage employment. Up to independence in 1963, there was no great advance in the rate of female participation in formal employment. The bulk of female labour remained self-employed in small-scale agriculture and in all branches of the economy, women's earnings were uniformly less than men's [50]. It remains to be seen whether independent Kenya will continue to follow this pattern, or whether its commitment to African socialism will really afford women an equal role in development. For many households, off-farm employment opportunities in the rural or urban labour markets represented an alternative source of income [26]. Since a large proportion of off-farm activities were taken up by men, there was a tendency for some farm families to become increasingly dependent on off-farm sources of income for their livelihood. When the male head of household was away, the females were left behind to look after the family and the farm. In most cases, Samia women took on extra responsibilities, in addition to their routine domestic duties though usually they were not expected to make major farm management decisions because this was perceived as culturally inappropriate. Small farmers participated in the market economy through the sale of their labour, surplus produce, and land to meet the rising cost of reproduction [25]. The emergence of off-farm labour markets had, thus, tended to increase labour mobility away from home, and for those who were unable to sell their labour, the experience could spell disaster or persistent hardship for the entire household. In addition, within each of these colonial labour systems, African women performed integral functions [73]. Much of their work was the same as that which they had performed in the traditional subsistence economy, but it had now become part of the new colonial systems of production, which was critical in enabling European and Asian entrepreneurs in Kenya to derive a profit.

**Women and the Labour Force in Kenya, 1895-1963:**

Women have been involved in labour force for over century, (KNA/PC/NZA/2/20/20 1944-1947). Women played a significant economic role in the labour system in Kenya from 1895 to 1962 [73]. However, studies show that this role has changed as the economy moved into a new phase after 1945. It was basically affected by the Mau Mau state of Emergency and the transition to independence [33]. During the pre-colonial period, women's contribution to subsistence farming and herding was substantial. There is considerable evidence that this contribution increased during the period of British colonial rule as the number of men leaving subsistence farming steadily increased [9]. Prior to World War II, the

few women who engaged in formal wage employment worked largely in agriculture. The move away from the use of migrant labour, which began after World War II, was accompanied by a steady rise in the number of women in formal employment, which were mostly in the agricultural sector [38]. The employment of women outside agricultural sector increased after the war, particularly, during the State of Emergency, but by 1956, this trend had slowed down. Up until independence in 1963, there was no great advance in the female rate of participation in formal employment except for engagement in agricultural sector, specifically for subsistence farming [22]. The bulk of female labour remained self-employed in small-scale agriculture and in all branches of the economy, women's earnings were uniformly less than men's [73]. It remained to be seen whether independent Kenya would continue to follow this pattern, or whether its commitment to African socialism really afforded women an equal role in development.

#### **Role of women in subsistence agriculture during the colonial period:**

Women played a critical role in food security in Samia by fulfilling their role as food providers [1]. Women were responsible for production of all or most food crops. In this variant, food plots were considered women's plot (KNA/ABK/12/45 1957). Men and women jointly cultivated staple food crops in fields controlled by male household heads. In this type, male household head controlled the output. Women's role in agriculture was highly variable [77]. While they dominated food production, the form of that involvement was a factor of many interacting variables that had a differential impact on men and women. These included; historical and socio-cultural variables, national and international policy and economic processes, imitation and role models. These variables were dynamic and in the context of modern Kenya, many traditional assumptions and practices were changing as agriculture became increasingly mechanized and modernized, wage employment grew in rural areas, rural outmigration, particularly by men, continued and population pressure on traditional lands affected negatively both the quantity and quality of the land available for food crops. The contribution of women to economic growth and development has been increasingly recognized in both academia and policy circles [2]. This growing recognition reflects the active participation of women in various aspects of growth, both through formal and informal production in recent years. In many countries in Africa during colonial period, there was rigid division of labour by gender in agriculture [65]. This division could be based on types of activities performed on the farm or type of crops grown by men and women. The division of labour was based on patriarchal norms that typically required women to care for the needs of the members of the households while men were involved in bringing cash income to the household [79]. Women were expected to help fathers, husbands in their fields, which increased women's workload. In some regions, women and men worked on separate plots growing different crops [79]. Women were usually engaged in subsistence farming to provide food to fulfil the needs of the members of household while men were engaged in production of cash or export crops. In the early 21st century, this pattern was prevalent in several Sub-Saharan African countries like Tanzania, and Uganda. This distinction can be explained as a result of gender norms that assign women with the responsibility of feeding family while men with the responsibility of providing cash income. Majuma in an oral interview conducted in Mudoma sub-location argued that:

*Although women mainly grew food crops for household consumption, if there was any marketable surplus they sold it in the market. However, Samia women's primary responsibility was to feed the family and only after that they could engage in other income generating activities. The distinction between crops was sometimes not very clear especially in the case of maize which was a staple crop in Luhya land, as well as, a cash crop. With the introduction of high yielding varieties of maize, the distinction was that the high yielding varieties tended to be men's crop and local varieties were women's crop (Majuma, O.I, 2017).*

The aspect of leaving particular activities specifically for the women was a common practice among the Luhya communities. Similarly, men resumed specific jobs which women could not do. This practice was not only common during the colonial era, but must have been inherited from the pre-colonial period. This pattern was also observed in Kitale where local varieties of maize were women's crop while hybrid varieties were cash crops cultivated by men. The logic was the same: high yielding varieties provided large amount of marketable surplus, which allowed men to obtain cash income while women continued with varieties that provided enough for domestic subsistence consumption. In addition, women's role was not limited to food production, they were also required to process and prepare the food they grew, perform care work in the household and help men in their cash crop production [32]. In Central Kenya, women were heavily involved in cash crop production while in Western Kenya women played an important role in food crop production and processing, trading, weaving and other non-farm activities [24].



**Family labour and control:**

Among the Abasamia, men were perceived as the head of the households and key decision makers. They indirectly influenced or controlled family labour [54]. As discussed earlier in section 3.3, women played a significant role in the agricultural labour force. In addition, women participated in all aspects of rural life in paid employment, trade, and marketing, as well as, tending crops and animals. They also collected firewood and water and showed care for family members. Consequently, their contribution to agricultural output was undoubtedly extremely significant. In general, women had dual responsibility for farm and household production. The fact that women were most common people found at home made them to resume full responsibility of looking after family farms as opposed to what men were engaged in. Namang'are in an oral interview observed that:

*Family labour in agricultural sector during the colonial period was mainly controlled by men. However, women played a critical role in provision of family labour in the agricultural farms since they were the ones who were commonly found at home and were free to participate on other available duties (Namang'are, O.I, 2017).*

Furthermore, the participants indicated that the reasons why women were involved in agricultural activities were the desire to earn extra income. This made women to embark on agricultural activities. Among the reasons was that of being a family tradition and personal interest. The scenario whereby more and more of men either temporarily or permanently migrated caused shortage of labour in rural areas. As a result, more women were left behind to do much of the farm work as paid or unpaid family labour. Labour migration was discovered to have been caused by a number of reasons such as lack of other alternative occupations; acquisition of technical know-how and husband's influence [41]. In order to counter attack the challenges associated with male labour migration, religion and availability of funds, credit facility had come on board to influence the degree of women's involvement in crop production. Apart from providing employment and income for resource-poor small farmers, especially women, poultry keeping also served as a means of capital acquisition and accumulation [35]. In an effort to reach and engage poor women in the community, there was need to recognize that some issues and constraints related to labour participation were gender-specific and stemmed from the fact that men and women played different roles [21]. There was also the need to understand that women and men had different needs and faced different challenges on a number of issues and at different levels. Rural women were very strong pillars of the economy in Abasamia community [27]. They basically worked in organized groups, and often engaged in more than one economic activity. In addition, they were major contributors to food production; had successfully managed human and economic resources to achieve optimum results; became employers, thereby reducing unemployment. The farms of the Abasamia rural women contributed to reduction in food shortage and contributed substantially to national agricultural output, maintenance of the environment and family food security [78].

**Women's right in regard to labour:**

In the colonial era, women never seemed to have freedom and right over their labour; the introduction of forced labour by colonialists infringed on their labour rights. As a result, family labour organization and decision making failed to work for most of the women during the colonial period. It thus affected women's decisions making processes; hence they had to wait until the male head of household made decisions [37]. This kind of situation was more prevalent in those households in which the male head was away from home either seeking wage employment or working elsewhere, while the women were left behind with the responsibility of taking care of the family and the farm but no authority to make the major decisions [67]. In such cases, rural women became their own bosses who had right over their labour (KNA/ABK/12/451957). For instance, they did not have to seek for permission from anyone before they could engage in any economic activities, especially those related to farm work or processing of farm proceeds. In a typical small farm household, the male head always made the major decisions on issues relating to farm management, organization of production, allocation and utilization of household resources, among other things. Traditionally, women were not expected to make such decisions or to raise livestock even though occasionally they helped with milking cows [5]. This clearly defined and rigidly maintained division of labour, was likely to create artificial labour shortages when labour was potentially available for farm work but could not be utilized simply because a particular task was considered to be culturally inappropriate and physically unsuitable for a particular sex or age category [17]. In addition, women participated in various works related to farming due to high demand of labour. For instance, they worked in the fields tilling the land and farming. They took part in sowing; weeding, and harvesting of crops. They cared for the children, cleaned, cooked and assisted in any way necessary. Hard physical labour like doing the laundry, carrying water and routine chores, such as emptying chamber pots and making beds were other forms of their duties performed on a daily basis.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

From the above discussions, it has been noted that Samia Sub-county experienced substantial changes during the colonial period. These changes were first introduced by the British colonialists. By the close of 1950s, Abasamia gender relations had gone through tremendous transformation, which led to gender disruption in response to forces within and without. Men had to reduce their participation in subsistence food crop production for women and children since they were forced to work in the colonists' farms at lower wages. In the absence of male labour, women had to gradually come in, in order to meet the new demands. During the colonial period, the main unit of food crop production was the family, and rural women played a critical role of ensuring that labour was available. This means that the production process was organized according to the specific needs of the family based on its own resources. The family mainly relied on its own labour pool, which served as a reservoir of labour that could be utilized for specific subsistence activities. Based on the division of labour, the study established that the traditional division of labour between men and women of Samia Community demonstrated that women's actual contribution to subsistence farming during the colonial period was great. Such contribution was immeasurably larger than her inferior social status could indicate. In general, a heavy share of the work of subsistence fell on women in Samia since they did the greater and more strenuous part of the garden labour. In addition, women were always available at home to attend to farming activities unlike their male counter parts that were sometimes out from home or busy attending to other activities unrelated to food crop production.

The coming of the colonialists from Europe brought more changes as they claimed the land that had been cared for and cultivated by Samia women. Both men and women were suddenly alienated from land that had defined them and their role in the society. This had huge impacts on their economy and food sources due to low participation in subsistence farming. The presence of the colonialists made women to be more dependent on men in the society, which led to a sense of male supremacy and dominance. Furthermore, the study established that during the colonial era, labour migration was a common phenomenon. It was characterized by men leaving their wives and children behind as they moved to other areas.

In addition, the study revealed that women's role in agriculture during the colonial period was highly variable. Although women dominated food production, the form of that involvement was a factor of many interacting variables that had a differential impact on men and women and involved historical and socio-cultural variables and economic processes. These variables were dynamic and in the context of modern Kenya, many traditional assumptions and practices were changing as agriculture became increasingly mechanized and modernized. Wage employment grew in rural areas; rural outmigration, particularly by men continued and population pressure on traditional lands affected negatively both the quantity and quality of the land available for subsistence food crop production.

The study indicated that rural women formed a very strong pillar of the economy in Abasamia community. They often engaged in more than one economic activity. In addition, they were major contributors to food production; had successfully managed human and economic resources to achieve optimum results; became employers of labour, thereby reducing unemployment. The farms of the Abasamia rural women contributed to reduction in food shortage and contributed substantially to family food security in Samia. Samia women participated in various works related to farming due to high demand of labour. For instance, they worked in the fields, tilling the land and farming. In addition, they took part in sowing; weeding, as well as, harvesting crops. Samia women's labour participation in both subsistence farming and domestic duties could not be overlooked since they gave their best in terms of labour provision for the success of subsistence food crop production during the colonial era.

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