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Who Benefits Whom? A Gendered, Socio-Economic Comparison of Maasai Men and Women

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Abstract

Gendered division of responsibilities is traditionally anchored in Maasai culture. While men focus on livestock as the main income activity, women are in charge of milking and also autonomous with regard to milk use decision. In addition, many Maasai men are married to several wives. All family units usually cooperate in various ways like food sharing or income pooling.

With the changing environment (socio-economic and natural) a diversification of livelihood strategies is observed by researchers. Concurrently, there appears to be some empirical evidence of shifts in gender roles.

In this paper, we use data of Maasai families living in rural areas of Morogoro region, Tanzania. First, we describe the characteristics and the socio-economic spheres of Maasai men (who are family or household heads) and women (who are sub-household heads) as separate economic actors. Second, we assess income levels of women and men and compare their contributions to the whole family income. Third, we focus on milk sales as women's main income source, and investigate who benefits from milk commercialisation.

Our findings suggest that with the limited income alternatives in the research area the traditional gender roles remain valid. While the total income of men is higher than the total income of women, the income-ratio at the sub-household level suggests a higher contribution by women. Our results indicate that most women control the direct use of income from milk sales. Considering indirect effects like reduced shopping money received from the husband, the milk income only benefits one fifth of women respondents. The supplementary housekeeping budget is mostly spent on diversifying and increasing food purchases.

Keywords: Gender roles, livelihoods, Maasai, milk sale, pastoralists, Tanzania, women's income