

CASE STUDY IN WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

A story from West Africa:

'Women's Gold' – shea butter from Burkina Faso

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Fatou Ouédraogo, shea butter producer

Fatou Ouédraogo, a widow in her mid-fifties, lives with her six children, four boys and two girls in Burkina Faso. Before the death of her husband she was a subsistence farmer growing food crops for her family and selling the surplus. In addition, she used to work on her husband's cotton farm. Following her husband's death, the land, which he had used to grow cotton, was reclaimed by her in-laws. According to Burkina Faso's inheritance laws, women cannot own or inherit land. As a result, after the death of her husband, Fatou had no land to produce cotton but needed income to sustain her family. This led her to seek paid work outside her home. She found work with one of the companies producing fruit and vegetables for export. When the company's management met its women workers' complaints against exploitative working conditions with threats and harassment, Fatou led a group of 20 women workers in the founding of an independent rural women's enterprise, the Association Songtaab-Yalgré, producing shea butter, a traditional women's product in Burkina Faso. The success of their enterprise, described below, makes this a telling case study in women's economic empowerment.

The national context

Burkina Faso is a land-locked West African country. It is ranked as one of the poorest countries in the world. Women constitute 52 per cent of the population of about 10 million. More than 75 per cent of adults are illiterate, and of these 80 per cent are rural women. Women constitute the majority of the poor people, and are constrained by laws

¹ <http://www.eclac.cl/mujer/curso/7>

and social discrimination that prevent them from owning property, borrowing money, or gaining access to land and natural resources.

Agriculture is the main economic activity. About 80 per cent of the population lives on subsistence agriculture. It contributes more than one-third of GDP, employs about 80 per cent of the labour force, and is the main source of income for rural communities. Burkina Faso's mineral resources include deposits of gold and manganese, but these remain underexploited. The industrial sector, contributing about 20 per cent of GDP, comprises mainly textiles, artisan manufacture, and small-scale agricultural processing.

Traditionally, the main export crops are livestock and cotton. These are referred to as men's cash crops, although women provide most of the labour. Women are primarily responsible for growing subsistence crops such as millet, maize and rice, and also for collecting shea nuts for export.

In the 1980s, Sub-Saharan Africa experienced the worst economic crisis in its history, as a result of deteriorating terms of trade, neglect of the agricultural sector, huge external debt and the burden of debt servicing, inappropriate domestic economic policies, and numerous political upheavals and instability. Towards the end of the decade, this crisis led the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to prescribe structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) to ensure debt repayment and economic restructuring. The SAPs consisted of trade liberalisation, export promotion, reduction in government deficits and public sector credit, devaluation of local currencies, privatisation of public services, liberalisation of agricultural marketing, and the elimination of price controls on produce. The disbursement of loans to many sub-Saharan African countries, including Burkina Faso, was made conditional upon their governments' accepting SAPs.

In Burkina Faso, cotton and horticultural exports were extensively promoted under the SAP. These sectors received major government investments, to the neglect of subsistence crops, the shea nut sector and – consequently – women farmers. At the time, despite declining world prices for cotton exports, very attractive producer prices were paid to

cotton farmers, who were also given fertilisers, pesticides and other inputs on credit. All this contributed to a huge increase in cotton exports. The horticultural sector also received immense support to boost its exports. Transnational corporations (TNCs) were encouraged to invest in horticulture to cater to the European markets for out-of-season fruits and vegetables, and were offered attractive incentives by the government in the form of a very low-cost female workforce, tax holidays, and ‘flexible’ labour laws. Another incentive for the corporations was the relative proximity of Burkina Faso to Europe. TNCs producing fruit and vegetables for export proliferated.

Women, already marginalised by laws and customs, were mostly favoured by these companies, based on gender-biased assumptions that women are more disciplined and obedient and thus less liable to organise as trade unionists, and that they have the ‘nimble fingers’ required for the delicate handling of these products. However, the jobs offered were precarious and the status low. While the TNCs reaped enormous profits, women worked on the farms under very poor conditions and at very low wages, and were hired on short-term contracts or on a casual basis without employment security, maternity protection, sick leave or pension schemes. Women workers were exposed to very poor safety standards, with detrimental effects on their social and reproductive rights.

Women workers also suffered when profit maximisation required cost reductions. Despite all the incentives enjoyed by the employers, the sector was still burdened with high processing and packaging costs, high freight charges, stringent European rules on maximum residue limits for pesticides, and increased competition from Central American and Asian countries and non-conventional markets such as North-west Africa and the Middle East. As the companies drastically reduced their costs, the female labour force in particular was drastically reduced.

In the 1990s, as a result of the adverse effects of the SAPs, living conditions deteriorated for many Burkinabé (the people of Burkina Faso). Women were affected most severely by the SAP policies. In particular, women working for the TNCs found themselves confronted with increased workloads, longer working hours and low, stagnant wages. The

government, in an effort to reverse this trend, made commitments to assist the poor. Acknowledging the feminised nature of poverty, it committed itself specifically to promoting women's economic empowerment by developing the shea sector.

Shea butter: The 'women's gold' of Burkina Faso

Shea nuts are known in the local Dioula language as *karite* (life). They grow mostly in the wild with little need for any special cultivation. The shea nut tree grows in abundance and is one of the few renewable resources in the semi-arid Sahel region of West Africa. It is found in a belt about 300 kilometres wide extending from Mali through Burkina Faso to Ghana, Togo and Benin. This 'shea belt' is the only place in the world where the tree grows. The largest concentration is found in Burkina Faso, across more than 80 per cent of the country. The shea tree has a very long lifespan of up to 200 years. It produces fruit after its fifteenth year, but does not reach full production until it is 25 years old. The shea tree has many uses: the bark is used as an ingredient in many traditional medicines against childhood ailments and in the treatment of minor scrapes and cuts. The shell serves as a mosquito repellent – vital in a region where malaria kills thousands of people a year. The shea tree also helps prevent wind erosion and adds organic matter back to the soil. The nuts are processed to obtain shea butter, which is used as cooking oil, for making soap, as medicine, and in cosmetics. In many western countries shea butter is highly prized for its superb healing and moisturising properties and is widely used in creams, sunscreen lotions and conditioners and in the treatment of burns and muscle pain. It is also used in chocolate manufacturing, since it complements cocoa very well, and is processed into baking fat, margarine, and cocoa butter substitutes.

Traditionally, shea nut harvesting and processing are rural women's work. The women would individually collect the nuts of the wild-growing shea tree and convert them to shea butter in a very labour-intensive process. Only small quantities of shea nuts were processed into butter, however. The women would grind the nuts by hand, press them – often walking several miles to a press in another village and back to carry out this stage of the process – and boil and filter the oil. Because the process was so labour-intensive and generated so little profit, many women simply sold the nuts whole for a very low

price. Women had no control over how the processed product was actually marketed externally; they were limited to selling internally the small quantities collected individually or as part of a small group of individuals. Men controlled the transportation and marketing of shea butter.

During the SAP period, the shea nut sector did not perform well, and women were unable to reap any substantial benefits from their production. At that time, the world price for shea nuts declined, while the SAP itself further disrupted the shea sector. For instance, the liberalisation of agricultural marketing through elimination of the price stabilisation board brought destabilised domestic trade severely and left the sector as a whole poorly organised; and the devaluation of the CFA Fr,² which was meant to boost earnings for local export producers, did not occur for women shea producers. Moreover, since about 80 per cent of rural women were illiterate and had very limited technical skills, they could not improve the quality of their products and market them. They also lacked access to the formal credit to purchase necessary inputs such as shea butter presses, and to information on strategies for promoting and marketing their products. Therefore, during this time, women shea nut producers were not directly benefiting from the trade. Shea nuts were bought below market price by middlemen and exported raw to be extracted and further processed into shea butter and other products outside Burkina Faso. Consequently, the majority of the shea nut profits went to foreign corporations, governments and middlemen, while Burkinabé women remained unable to take advantage of this economic opportunity.

In 1994, as living conditions continued to worsen for many Burkinabé women under the impact of SAPs, the government increased its support to the shea sector, and solicited donor assistance for its development, in line with its commitment to promoting women's economic empowerment through the development of the sector. Many donor agencies responded to this call, including UNIFEM, the Centre Canadien d'étude et de coopération internationale (CECI), a Canadian NGO, and the government of Taiwan.

² The Communauté Financière Africaine Franc (CFA Fr) is the local currency used in Burkina Faso and other francophone countries in the subregion.

In 1997, UNIFEM conducted a comprehensive review of the sector, which revealed that the greatest potential source of income for women producers lies in the production and marketing of shea butter rather than the raw nuts. It was noted that in 1997, a tonne of unprocessed shea nuts sold domestically for CFA70,000 and externally for CFA100,000. But the same tonne, when processed into shea butter, yielded CFA148,000. Moreover, the review revealed, women were not benefiting from the sector. Following this review, UNIFEM started assisting women's groups to boost their ability to produce shea butter and to link them directly with potential export markets. The aim was to give women's groups the opportunity to increase their access to the world market and to improve Burkinabé women's economic returns from shea nuts. Other donor interventions included financial and technical assistance specifically targeted at women's groups in the sector.

Fatou and the Songtaab-Yalgré rural women's association

Fatou Ouédraogo's job in the export-oriented fruit and vegetable company gave her an opportunity to earn extra income to supplement her household income. However, she had to work long hours just to earn enough for her family's minimal survival. Fatou and her female co-workers were not allowed to leave the workplace without fulfilling their daily quotas. Faced with continued hardship and harassment, Fatou mobilised 20 women employees to protest against the poor working conditions and to demand that the company respect its women workers' rights. Since, as employees of the company, they were not allowed to join a union, the group met often in Fatou's house to organise and strategise. After several meetings, the group decided to meet with their management team to present their case and their demands. After several delaying tactics, the management agreed to meet the group. The management team was shocked and upset upon hearing their demands, since this was the first and only time that its workers – especially its female workers – had made such bold demands. After the meeting with management, the women workers staged a successful demonstration. It received wide media coverage and support from many organisations. However, after this protest, the women were subjected to even greater mistreatment, harassment and frustrating encounters. Finally, the group of

20 decided to tender their resignations. The management team responded with threats. However, this did not make the women revoke their decision. Instead, their resignations triggered a series of other resignations by most of the company's female employees and some male employees. After three months, the company had to close down and leave the country, since it had lost the majority of its productive female labour force. The management team had underestimated the strength of the group, their strong ability to mobilise other women workers, and the extent of their contribution to the smooth running of the company.

After this encounter, the group decided to pool their resources to form a shea butter enterprise, which they named the Association Songtaab-Yalgré (*songtaab*, in the Mooré language, means 'to help one another') as an income-generating activity. The association consisted mainly of widows and was headed by Fatou as its founder. The positions of president, treasurer and secretary were elected and occupied by women members of the group. The association became involved in collecting and processing shea nuts into shea butter and exporting the butter. The women's decision coincided with the government's strong commitment to promoting women's economic empowerment through the development of the shea sector. The government, together with other donors, provided support to the group in the form of loans, literacy and technical training.

The main principles of the Association Songtaab-Yalgré are:

1. to assist women members to improve their living conditions;
2. to fight women's poverty, particularly in rural areas;
3. to reduce gender inequality by valuing women's indigenous knowledge and skills and providing them with stable incomes;
4. to empower its members and Burkinabé women;
5. to assure their autonomy and self-promotion;
6. to enhance the addition of value to shea products;
7. to advance a member-controlled, open, decentralised organisational structure;
8. to encourage the conservation of shea trees and other indigenous natural resources.

The association became involved in two main types of activity: economic activities aimed at providing income for women through the processing and marketing of shea butter, and socio-cultural and self-improvement activities (literacy, training, health). The women pooled their resources to start their enterprise, and also received loans from various organisations to help them expand and improve their production. They used this money to purchase simple presses and other time- and labour-saving equipment, and to buy raw nuts in bulk from other women who specialise in just picking the fruits, thus contributing to those women's economic sustainability as well as ensuring economies of scale and regular supply for the group.

In addition, the association's members received technical training to enable them to achieve the standards of quality for shea butter required by foreign buyers. The women are now responsible for the entire chain of production, processing and export of shea butter. No middlemen are involved. The women control the entire process and the profits are shared among the group's members. Now, selling the butter, they earn four times the price they used to get for whole nuts. In addition, they earn additional income by renting the pressing machines to women from other villages when they are not using them.

In two years the Association Songtaab-Yalgré had paid back its loans and was looking to expand further. It is now a member of the Union des groupements Kiswendside (UGK), a national network of women shea producers comprising more than 100 shea enterprises and with a total of 1,174 members, mostly women who live in villages outside the capital, Ouagadougou. This network is actively lobbying government to give women land and secured titles to the land where the shea trees grow.

Why has the Association Songtaab-Yalgré succeeded?

The Association Songtaab-Yalgré is an example where, for once, women are reaping the fruits of their labour. The benefits of their production now go directly to association members. Many factors are responsible for the success of the association – a success that translates into many significant achievements not only for the association's members but for their families, their communities, the shea sector and Burkina Faso in general.

The following are the key contributing factors:

- The main factor in the group's success is its dynamic founder, Fatou, who was able to mobilise her colleagues to resist the violation of their rights by a foreign company and to establish their own shea enterprise.
- It was advantageous that the group selected a sector where women were already the main economic actors and had a wealth of local indigenous knowledge.
- The group's decision to establish a shea enterprise coincided with an increased international demand for shea butter, arising from a growing interest in its use in the cosmetics industry in Europe, the USA and Japan. The EU's decision in 2000 to authorise the use of up to 5 per cent of non-cocoa vegetable fats in chocolate manufacturing was also helpful. The increasing international demand for shea butter ensures the availability of ready markets for the association's products for export.
- The decision to set up a shea butter enterprise coincided with the government's commitment to developing the shea sector further and its ability get other donors to support the sector as well.
- The establishment of a committee tasked with coordinating the proliferating donor assistance to the sector avoided the duplication of resources and ensured the effective utilisation of donor assistance.
- The appointment of a dynamic, high-profile woman – the Minister responsible for Women's Advancement – to lead the committee and effectively coordinate all assistance to the shea sector was very strategic.
- In particular, UNIFEM was very instrumental to the success of the group. Most fundamentally, it linked the group directly with foreign buyers. In particular, in 2001, it negotiated an important deal with the French cosmetic company L'Occitane. The company contracted the Association Songtaab-Yalgré to supply shea butter, and plans are now in place to supply it regularly and in increased quantities. As part of this arrangement, L'Occitane also provided training in quality control methods and paid

the women in advance, which gave them greater economic security during the production phase. This arrangement provided a good start for the group.

- The association's purchase of appropriate technologies such as simple presses, centrifuges and solar driers significantly reduced the time and labour necessary for processing, and this has not only boosted production but leaves the women with more time for other activities of social and cultural value to themselves and their communities.
- The technical training received by the group enabled them to achieve the quality standards required by foreign buyers. Members of the group also attended literacy classes, especially in Mooré and Dioula, two of the most widely spoken indigenous languages. These trainings allowed the women to manage and understand their production systems better and to acquire key information about market trends.

The skills and knowledge gained and the women's access to credit and appropriate technology contributed to the success and the increased export of their products. The training they received in the Association Songtaabe-Yalgré has also created a multiplier effect, as its members are now able to train other groups of women producing shea butter. As a result, such groups are proliferating across Burkina Faso and in the neighbouring countries. Several organisations now work directly with women-owned shea-butter enterprises across West Africa to promote community development and to strengthen women's bargaining power in the world market. The women's groups are further exploring and expanding into new markets within Burkina and in neighbouring countries. This also extends the shea commodity chain, linking African women producers in remote villages to Western consumers.

What enabled the women's empowerment

Fatou is a model farmer, an inspiration to small farmers in general and to women farmers in particular. However, without the support of the Association Songtaab-Yalgré this would not have been possible. The association has been very instrumental in transforming one of the few economic assets in Sahelian Africa controlled by women —

shea butter — from a less-than-subsistence, informal-sector activity into a formalised and systematised enterprise. It has become an enterprise capable of generating not only dramatically increased incomes, but also new jobs, new skills and new opportunities, organisational training for the further integration of women into formal economic activities, and participation in the international market and the globalisation process. The association's earnings now directly benefit some of the poorest villagers in a country classified as one of the poorest in the world.

As members of an association, the women have greater bargaining power to negotiate with their government, donors and the buyers of their produce. Thus, the exports of shea nuts from Burkina Faso have increased immensely and the country is now the second largest producer of shea butter. It produces 40,000–80,000 tonnes annually. In 2000, total export earnings from unprocessed shea kernels and shea butter brought in CFA 5bn (USD 7m) (see *Africa Recovery* 15/4 (December 2001), p. 6).

The enterprise contributes to increasing the local economy and has enabled the women to take control of their lives. The association has created jobs and extra income for its female members, who now earn enough money to buy food and medicine and pay their children's school. They have an enterprise that is entirely their own. This increased income for women means an increased income available to their households and, hence, increased well-being for the family. Furthermore, in Burkina Faso, as in many poor countries of the world, female participation in the formal economy is expected to be positively correlated with improved educational levels and social status, reduced fertility rates, a prolonged life span, and overall economic development.

It has been noted that earning regular incomes allows these women producers to earn the respect of their family and the right to speak out in the community. Their economic position is also enhanced, not only through the additional income they earn, but also through the technical skills and organisational capacities they acquire. The men in their villages take them more seriously and have started to include them in community

decision-making. Belonging to this group has established a sense of confidence and camaraderie amongst its members.

The newly empowered women have become catalysts for change in their families and their communities. Many women-owned shea-butter enterprises are working with the development agencies to promote community development and to strengthen women's bargaining power in the world market. Consequently, many strategic alliances have been established at local, national and international level between associations of rural women producer groups, local businesses, NGOs, government agencies and international companies and organisations. Furthermore, there is evidence that useful linkages are created between these village entrepreneurs and relevant service providers.

The enterprise has given the women improved skills and knowledge in the sustainable use and management of shea tree products, given that a major challenge is to protect the existing trees. In addition, it educates the general public about environmental sustainability, since it is illegal to pick unripe nuts (mature nuts fall to the ground). This enables them to generate greater income from harvesting, processing and selling shea and at the same time provides an incentive for them to conserve and manage their trees. As a result, skills and knowledge related to the sustainable use and management of shea tree products will be improved in the communities.

This enterprise provides an opportunity for the women's groups to expand their markets and to conquer new markets in neighbouring countries. Burkina's annual shea nut output may be around 850,000 tonnes (the highest anywhere in the world), but only 6 per cent of this – some 50,000 tonnes – is currently being harvested. Therefore the potential increase of the sector is very large. Linking women producers to global markets for shea butter has also strengthened women's economic security.

It is expected that the Burkina Faso government's policies on poverty reduction, women's economic security and empowerment, and the development and use of

sustainable natural resources will be better informed by practical experiences and the real concerns of the Association Songtaab-Yalgré Women's Group.

The lessons learnt from this unique experience will be disseminated at local and national levels, and regionally throughout West Africa. The Association Songtaab-Yalgré already serves as a model for other women's groups in the region who hope to begin their own shea butter enterprises. This is having a ripple effect, as women's groups from neighbouring villages and even from countries such as Mali and Ghana regularly visit the enterprise to gain knowledge to improve and expand their own enterprises. Given its success, this enterprise also provides an opportunity for its members to serve as advocates for the reduction of the negative impact of global trade and investment policies on their livelihoods, and for the promotion of gender equality.

Conclusions

This case study has examined how rural women mobilised to establish a women's shea butter sector enterprise in Burkina Faso. By adding value through processing of shea nuts into shea butter, women are directly reaping the benefits of their labour. The enterprise is creating jobs and providing extra income to the women. Shea is one of the few economic commodities in the region entirely under the control of women. In some cases men take over control of enterprises when they become profitable. However, this has not occurred in the shea sector and women continue to control the entire process and the benefits directly accrue to them.

The government's commitment to promoting women's economic empowerment was instrumental in the revitalisation of the shea nut sector and the improved well-being of many Burkinabé women. This case study shows that with the right government commitment and political will, appropriate support to women's organisations from the government and donor agencies, the availability of appropriate technology, access to credit, and access to expanding markets, the women's enterprise has become an overall success. It also gives an insight into how linking women producers to global markets strengthened women's economic security and empowered them. The women are

empowered at different levels: the enterprise has enabled them to improve their living standards, increased the country's foreign earnings, and contributed to the growth of the country's economy.

As demonstrated by the success of the Association Songtaab-Yalgré, the development of the shea butter sector in Burkina Faso has great potential. However, such development must occur with restraint and consideration of possible challenges and limitations, in order to remain sustainable and viable for rural women producers. The major challenges include organising coordinated and concerted action above partisan concerns, in order to bring together national stakeholders of the shea in a tangible (and long-term sustainable) structure, to establish common standards for product quality and product certification, and to ensure consistency of supply. To improve market access further for shea products of Burkinabé origin, the organisational, technical and financial capacities of women must be strengthened so that they can manage their own shea-butter enterprises. Since shea is a still underexploited resource, there is a strong need for the women to process larger quantities of nuts. In order to do this, additional technology is required, such as motorised presses. The spare parts for this equipment and its regular availability are prerequisites for the faster processing of higher volumes of nuts so as to meet the growing international demand for shea products. Another challenge is to resolve problems related to packaging to improve market access for shea products of Burkinabé origin. However, the most immediate challenge is to protect the existing trees, and efforts must continue to concentrate on strengthening women's access rights to the valuable nuts while sustaining the trees from overexploitation.

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Possible questions for a debate:

1. How can increase women's access to the world market be increased, and how to counter the inclination of global trade to further marginalise women and the poor by ensuring that benefits go to the women?
2. How can any TNC takeover of the shea sector be best avoided?
3. Are there subregional efforts to ensure the success of women's shea enterprises?
4. What are the sustainability elements to be addressed in these enterprises and this sector? How can the shea sector be used to promote environmental sustainability?
5. What is the capability of the shea sector to affect gender equity and empowerment in the current period of contemporary globalisation? What threats and opportunities does globalisation hold for women in the sector?
6. How to avoid male dominance of the enterprise in the future?
7. How can women capitalise on and profit from the new international demand for natural oils?