

Women in the shea industry: The case of Kusawgu in the Northern Region of Ghana

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Abstract: This research sought to highlight the experiences of women in the shea industry in Kusawgu in Ghana. Recommendations to enhance and sustain the industry were also explored. A total of 60 women from four shea production groups, who lived in Kusawgu, participated in focus group discussions. The data was first analysed separately by the two researchers. Results were then compared to reconcile differences. The study demonstrates that the shea industry undoubtedly provided means of livelihood, self-dignity and respect for the women. Positive outcomes for working in groups include quick processing; sense of belonging and social capital; security and peace of mind; and skills development. However, lack of access to microfinance, travelling for longer distances, the period of time required to get water and fuel-wood, gender-based land ownership discrimination, and extinction of shea trees hamper production and income. Regardless of these challenges the women demonstrated resiliency by their continuous work in the industry. Due to the potential of the shea industry to reduce poverty among women, government should work hand-in-hand with the traditional authority to develop measures to sustain the industry. Social work practitioners could build the capability of the women in the shea industry to access existing pro-poor programmes.

Keywords: women; shea industry; Northern Ghana

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Introduction

The shea tree is exclusively indigenous to West and Central Africa. It is particularly abundant in the northern savannah areas of Ghana. The tree grows naturally in the wild in the dry savannah belt of West Africa, from Senegal in the west to Sudan in the east, and onto the foothills of the Ethiopian highlands (Addaquay, 2004).

In Ghana, the shea tree grows over almost the entire area of northern Ghana, covering about 77,670 square kilometres (Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), 1988). Techno Serve Ghana (2004) asserts that Ghana has the potential to produce 90% of the world's shea kernels. This implies that Ghana is endowed with an economic natural resource that could be exploited and used as a vessel for substantial poverty reduction and socio-economic development, especially, in northern Ghana, which is classified as the poorest sector of the country. However, much of this potential is yet to be tapped given that much (35-55%) of the products is never collected or utilised (Addaquay, 2004; Lovett, 2004). From personal conversations with some of the women in the shea industry in Lonto, in the Kpandai District of the Northern Region, reasons for unpicked shea kernels include: (i) growth of weed over the shea kernel, (ii) buried kernels due to rains and long exposure in the field, and (iii) bush fires destroying the kernels (M. A. Donko, N. Kunde and M. Nkpayi, January 30th, 2017).

Additionally, the industry records low productivity due to the use of insufficient modern technology (Aculey, 2007). Traditional shea butter processing is arduous, labour-intensive and time consuming. Processing of 1 kilogramme (kg) of shea butter takes one person about 20-30 hours from collection to final product and 8.5–10.0kg of fuel wood is needed to produce 1kg of shea butter (Bonkougou, 2005). Women who predominantly work in this industry cover longer distances to access fuel wood and water. These practices affect the quantity and quality, as well as the marketability of the products, which in turn affect income from the sales (Aculey, 2007).

The shea tree has many benefits: nutritional, medicinal, ecological and economical. Shea butter (product of the shea tree), which is naturally rich in vitamins A, E, and F, is used in the confectionery, pharmaceutical and cosmetic industries (Okullo *et al*, 2010). Shea butter serves as ingredient in the cosmetic, pharmaceutical and food industries (D'Auteuil, 2008; Alander, 2004, Okullo *et al*, 2010; Soro *et al.*, 2014). About 95% of the international supply of shea butter goes to the food industry (for chocolate, margarine, confectioneries), while the rest is absorbed by the cosmetic industry (D'Auteuil, 2008). Shea butter also has important therapeutic properties for skin protection and for treating skin diseases. It is also used for self-beautification (Baba, 2008, Lovett, 2004). The growth rate of this shea butter market is over 25% per annum (Lovett, 2004).

Women are predominantly involved with the picking of shea kernels and the processing of the butter. A report by Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV,

2006) indicates that about 600,000 women in Northern Ghana depend on incomes from the sale of shea kernel and butter to provide for their basic needs and that of their children and other family members. This is especially important for the women as they are more vulnerable to poverty due to gender inequality which limits opportunities for them. However, studies indicate that the income women earn from this industry is generally low (Okolo, *et al.*, 2016; Suleman, 2008) because there are too many intermediaries who dictate prices of the products (SNV, 2006; Lovett, 2004). The use of ineffective traditional processing methods and lack of access to microfinance (Aculey, 2007; SNV, 2014) compound the problem.

These challenges have prompted the formation and empowerment of women's groups to improve bargaining power for shea products as well as to access credit and inputs for picking and processing of shea kernels (Perakis, 2009; SNV, 2014). For example, SNV has supported and empowered about 1,000 women's groups in 27 districts in the Northern sector of Ghana to form co-operative unions. West Gonja District, the study location, benefits from this initiative. Thirty women's groups from this district have joined West Gonja Coop Union (SNV, 2014).

The socio-economic importance of shea products, especially, the potential for poverty reduction among women (who are over represented among the poor) in Northern Ghana (United Nations Development Programme, 2007), cannot be overemphasised. It is obvious that women are over represented in the shea industry, spending much of their time and effort but they earn relatively lower income. Studies that have been conducted in Northern Ghana about the shea industry focused more on value chain and economic importance. There is a gap in the literature about women's voices regarding their experiences in the shea industry and their suggestions which could provide sustainable strategies to advance and sustain the industry and hence improve their overall wellbeing. Boafo (2014) posits that scrutinising rural areas for propositions that will enhance the sustainability of the shea industry is imperative. Could this exercise also result in the empowerment of women in the rural Northern Region to reduce poverty? This study targeted women in Kusawgu (which is more rural) in the Northern Region.

Empowerment theory

Empowerment refers to the process of helping individuals, groups and organisations to gain personal, interpersonal or political power to enable them take measures to improve their lives and take charge of their environments (Gutierrez & Lewis 1998; Wallerstein, 1992). Power is defined as the ability to influence people and decisions in order to achieve a desired goal (Cornell Empowerment Group, 1989; Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2012). While some people have power by virtue of their access to and control of wealth and political decisions, the majority have very little or none (Moscovitch & Drover, 1981). The more powerful people tend to be on top

of the pyramid, occupy most sensitive positions in the society, hence, controlling resources and making decisions which impact everyone in the society, but mostly favoring them at the expense of the majority. Hence, it is important to build the power of those who are powerless in all areas of their lives including personal, social, cultural, economic, and political power to enable them fully participate and be integrated into mainstream society. There are several levels of empowerment including individual, groups, communities and societal. Forms of empowerment include economic and knowledge based capacity building and access to political decision making.

Goals and objectives

The overarching goal of the study was to deepen understanding of the experiences of women in the shea industry in Kusawgu and the meaning they attach to these experiences. Another goal was to explore sustainable strategies to advance and sustain the shea industry and the overall wellbeing of the women in the industry. Specific study objectives include:

1. To explore the benefits of the shea industry to the women in Kusawgu who are engaged in the shea industry.
2. To examine the challenges women in the shea industry in Kusawgu encounter.
3. To discover coping mechanisms the women employ to survive in the shea industry.
4. To develop guidelines that could inform policy and practice interventions to sustain the shea industry.

Methodology

This study employed qualitative research approach. Specifically, focus group discussions were used. This method facilitated easy access to information from the participants as well as created a platform for free and more participatory discussions to advance and sustain the shea industry in the Kusawgu area. Purposive sampling was used to help concentrate on the people with particular characteristics who could better provide the relevant research information desired. All four shea butter production groups in the town participated in the study. Sixty members (15 from each group) were selected for the study. There were four focus group discussions, one for each group.

To recruit study participants, the researchers contacted the Assembly man of Kusawgu and discussed the research project with him. He then led the researchers

to the leaders of the groups, who were in turn informed about the study. The leaders then relayed information about the study to their members. The leaders were requested to select 15 volunteers from each group for the study. Participants' consent (consent was verbally read to them) and voluntary participation were sought before the interviews.

Semi-structured interview guide, comprising questions covering the topic, were used. The focus group discussions were audio and video recorded (with permission from participants) and were used to enhance data collection and to serve as reference points for the study. Each of the interviews lasted for about an hour. The discussions were done with interpretation from the local language into English and vice versa by the Kusawgu Assemblyman.

The data of the study were analysed manually. To analyse the data, the audiotapes were reviewed before transcription; the audios were transcribed verbatim. The narratives were read several times before the analysis, to allow immersion of self into the data. Line by line analysis was used to develop codes to determine themes and categories to draw conclusions about the research topic. The videotapes facilitated context analysis and reflection on the project. The two researchers analysed data separately and compared themes and categories. Differences were reconciled. In the analysis, pseudonyms were used to protect confidentiality and participants' identities. The authors sought for ethical clearance from the lead author's institution and all guidelines were duly followed. All names presented in the results section were pseudonyms to ensure anonymity of participants.

Results

Several themes emerged from the study and were grouped under:

1. Benefits of shea industry for the individual,
2. Advantages (benefits) of working in groups,
3. Challenges women encounter in the industry,
4. Their coping mechanisms, and
5. Recommendations.

The benefits of working in the shea industry are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Benefits of working in the shea industry

Themes	Subthemes				
	Domestic help	Employment	Income	Savings and investment	Self-dignity and respect
Benefits for the individual					
Benefits for working in groups	quick processing and increased productivity	unity, sense of belonging and social capital	peace of mind and security	skills development	

Benefits for the individual

Domestic help

The women called shea butter ‘domestic help’ due to its several uses, including cooking, hair care, body care, health care, child care, and soap for bathing, cleaning, washing (see Table 2). These numerous uses of shea butter, according to the women, saved them a lot of money they would have used to buy ingredients for those purposes as indicated by Naphisa (G1, 66 yrs):

The shea industry is just of a great help to us. I process the butter and I use it at home for domestic use without going for a type of expensive oil, cream or detergent since it can serve the purpose the expensive oils serve at home.

Shea butter is a health aid for the women because they used it to treat sores, boils, cuts, swells, insect bites as well as for massage to relieve pain.

Employment

Shea kernel picking and butter processing were sources of employment for the Kusawgu women who participated in this study. They gave several labels to this form of employment to describe what the job meant to them, including: ‘the ultimate job’; ‘great job’; ‘great important job’; ‘means a lot job’; and ‘lucrative job’. They claimed that this source of employment is meaningful and gives them independence. They also noted the ease with which one could access this kind of job (since little capital is required) compared to other activities like farming which require inputs such as land, seeds, and fertiliser.

Taiba (G4, 48yrs): The shea industry is the cheapest work to do without capital. Without capital, you can just pick the fruits and then process it to butter but with other activities like farming, you need to buy spray, fertilisers, seedlings, pumping machine and many other things.

While some of the participants believed the shea industry job is for the uneducated (42 out of the 60 participants studied had no education), some claimed they joined in as a last resort because they could not find other jobs in the area, also access to this kind of job was easy as discussed previously. This is noted by Azara (G2, 66yrs):

I am in the shea butter industry because there is no other work for me to do. I get myself engaged with shea butter industry. I go round the bush and pick the shea kernels, process them into butter and then sell it to buy whatever I need with the money I get.

Income

Money earned from the shea industry helped the women in several ways which resulted in labels such as 'life's problem solver'; 'home problem solver'; 'family problem solver'; and 'other people's problem solver'. The labels were noted as meaningful to the women because they could accomplish a lot with the shea proceeds. One thing that was important to the women was investing in their children's education. They believed that their children were their future support and, hence, they were relieved that they could provide for their children's educational needs. The narrative below described this scenario:

Amina (G2, 58yrs): I am into the shea butter industry because of my children and I. I pick up the shea kernel fruits and then process it, after selling it, I use the money to pay my children's school fees and also buy their books and other educational needs.

Another interesting and important finding of this study was that, the shea industry, according to the women, financially empowered them to support their husbands to provide for the home as well as lend their husbands money for their farming and other issues.

Kanyiti (G2, 70yrs): The shea butter has made my home a sustained one because any time my husband is not able to provide, we rely on the money from the shea butter industry.

Ayishaitu (G3, 67yrs) I sometimes support my husband to take care of the home and also support him with money I get from the shea butter industry to do his farming.

Amina (G4, 58yrs): The shea butter is very helpful because I prepare stew to feed my home with the shea butter. When your husband brings yam home and there is nothing or he has no money to add to you, the shea butter you have at home will just help because with it and your pepper and salt, food is ready.

They also noted that they completely took over the role of their husbands during scarcity (dry season period).

Aminatu (G1, 70yrs): During food scarcity, I process the shea kernels into butter and sell it to buy foodstuffs and ingredients to help keep up my family for the period until there is abundance of food in the rainy season for my husband to take up his responsibility from me.

Another important use of income is for health care. Health care is important in everyone's life. And because it can be expensive, it is imperative that everyone finds ways to pay for their help care. The women narrated that they used proceeds from shea butter to pay for their health care expenses such as buying drugs for themselves and their children.

Salamatu (G2, 69yrs): Most times when my children are sick, I pick the shea kernels, process it and quickly sell to send my children to hospital. I also get money from the shea butter industry to cater for my own health needs.

Savings and investment

Sources of savings for these women are diverse and unique. One form of savings identified is the traditional savings from income they earned from the shea industry. Participants also noted that the use of shea butter for domestic purposes saved them money they would have used to buy items for the home, thereby increasing the likelihood of more savings as commented by Mari (G1, 65yrs), 'This helps me to save the money I would have used for buying soap and this is why I am into the shea butter industry.'

Another source of savings, which is also a form of investment, is buying and storing other foodstuff from shea kernel/butter proceeds and re-selling for more money as noted by Minatu (G2, 66yrs), 'I always sell it to buy other foodstuff down and sell it in the future.' Yet another interesting kind of saving is that the women stored the shea kernels and either sold them raw or processed during scarcity to make more money.

Aminatu (G1, 70yrs): The shea butter industry is very important. During food scarcity, I process the shea kernels into butter and sell it to buy foodstuffs and ingredients for the house.

Katumi (G3, 62yrs): In times of hardship, I just fetch one bowl and sell to feed my family so that they do not starve and I also use it to buy clothes.

It is also important to note that, the women used proceeds from the Shea industry to invest in other ventures, especially farming. The money is used to purchase farming inputs such as seedlings, fertiliser and farming tools.

Adamu (G4, 25yrs): The shea butter industry has made me to get money to do farming. I pick the fruits, process it and sell it and afterwards I go to the market and buy seedlings, fertiliser

and others things which I use for my farming activities.

Fayima (G1, 57yrs): I also process the shea kernels and sell it and then I get money to cultivate other crops and vegetables. I sell the crops and solve my needs and then use the vegetables for my cooking and other domestic purposes. All these farming and crops are gotten from the sale of my shea butter, which is why I am into the shea butter industry.

Self-dignity and respect

The participants recounted how the shea industry had accorded them self-dignity and respect as commented by Ramatu (G3, 68yrs), ‘It has given me respect among colleagues, because without it I would have been useless. It has helped me take care of my children when my husband passed away.’

Benefits of Working in Groups

Quick processing and increased productivity

Because work is shared among the group members, the women noted that they finished on time and within the shortest possible time, thus making the work much easier and less stressful. Division of labour was seen playing out among members of these groups as stated in the narration below:

Akos (G4, 55yrs): If you are in a group, there is division of labour. Some do the pounding, some do the fetching, some do the frying and some do the mixing and the work is done quickly with little effort so you don't get too tired.

Participants also noted that working in groups gave them access to equipment such as motor king and bicycles which aided processing of the shea nuts and fostered speedy productivity compared to working alone.

Fatima (G1, 56yrs): When you are an individual, you buy or pick the kernels in small quantity and so you have to carry it on your head or bicycle but with the group, you buy or pick the kernel in large quantity and so you get a motor king from the group to carry the kernels to the group site for processing and so there is not too much stress when it comes to getting the shea kernels for processing because you don't carry it on your head.

The equipment was made possible because the women noted that they contributed money for the group project. The contribution fetched more money for the project compared to one person's resources as pointed out by Zaratu (G4, 55yrs), ‘We bring our monies together and prepare the shea butter and sell it and keep the profit, and we use the original money over and over again to raise capital for ourselves.’

Unity, sense of belonging and social capital

The women reported that they had developed mutual relationships and social networks from working in groups which had been very beneficial to their work and social lives.

Babe (G2, 65yrs): When a problem occurs in the life of a member, the group selects representatives (four or five people) to attend to the problem of the member. Examples are marriages and naming ceremonies. This makes the members have a sense of security and warmth.

Adamu (G4, 25yrs): It promotes unity. The group brings us together. Whenever you have a problem, the group members come together, raise funds to help you and if it is an occasion, they help you to do your work so that, things can go on smoothly for you.

Ajara (G3, 53yrs): This group work is good because we support each other, so even if one is absent or sick, the work is not stagnant, because there are others to do the work, but if you are alone, the work becomes stagnant when you are indisposed or unavailable.

The participants also noted that the groups created a sense of belonging and unity among group members as narrated by Ayishatu (G1, 67yrs); 'The shea butter industry also promotes peace and unity among us the women in the group and so gives us a sense of belonging.'

Security and peace of mind

The women reported having peace of mind and security by working in groups. Their peace of mind and security were as a result of the mutual help received from group members for their industries and social lives noted in the narrations below:

Fuseina (G2, 56yrs): There is peace of mind because when you are tired others will work for you so you have a stable mind.

Katumi (G3, 62yrs): I feel secure and protected when working in a group, because when I don't, my friends help me out. The help that comes from the group gives me security.

Skills development

Working in groups requires certain skills. The participants identified several skills they have developed working in groups including increased understanding, deepened production skills, team player skills, interpersonal skills, leadership and effective communication skills.

Katumi (G3, 62yrs): Working in a group helps us work well together and achieve much more than working as individuals. We share skills and discuss ideas which helped us to deepen our

understanding of the industry we are in. It helps us develop our skills; being part of a team will help you develop your interpersonal skills such as speaking and listening as well as team working skills such as leadership, and working with and motivating others.

Challenges of the Shea Industry

Regardless of the advantages reported in relation to the shea industry, the participants also reported challenges. The challenges are grouped under the following themes: (a) water, fuel wood and machines for processing; (b) access to capital; (c) risks to picking kernels; and (d) gender-based discrimination in land ownership.

Water, fuel wood and machines for processing

Water and fuel wood are important materials for Shea butter processing. But the participants recounted the difficulty in accessing these materials as narrated by Amina and Fusena from groups one and two respectively:

Amina (G1): The first challenge in the shea butter industry is shortage of water. The source of water is very far from our village so we travel for long distance to fetch water.

Fehata (G2, 66yrs): Water is a serious problem. The source of water is very far. And when we go we get very tired when we come back. The second challenge is firewood. Firewood is also difficult to find and the cost of buying firewood is very high.

Also, grinding machine, (one of the essential tools for shea butter processing) was located several miles away from the participants, thus complicating their situation.

Makera (G4, 30yrs): There is no grinding mill near to us and hence transporting it to the grinding source, buying firewood, water and other things makes our little resource depleted and we suffer.

Additionally, some of the participants said that, although water and firewood were expensive, they had no option.

Akosua (G4, 55yrs): We buy water and firewood and we do not have money since the charge is always very high. But, we cannot carry firewood on our heads from the next two villages so we just have to buy the firewood at a very high cost.

Access to capital

Lack of access to capital to develop and expand their shea business was identified as another challenge for the women.

Ramata (G1, 68yrs): We don't have support coming so we are not able to excel in the shea butter industry so if we get help coming from organisations and individuals, it will boost our business in the shea butter industry.

Babe (G2, 65yrs): We have no capital to buy the shea kernels so we use only what we have; pick the kernels ourselves and it does not make us grow.

Some of the women reported that sometimes they were compelled to buy shea kernels on credit, then pay higher amounts to their creditors after processing.

Fatima (G1, 56yrs): We don't also have capital of our own to do the industry. In times of shortage of the kernels, we have to buy on credit from the market to process it into the shea butter and sell before we pay our creditors.

Participants recounted that the lack of capital also compelled them to buy and process shea kernels in bits, which could be stressful given that the majority (36 out of 60) of study participants were above 40 years.

Ayishatu (G1, 67yrs): I buy the ingredients for processing in bits, that is, in small quantities and process it bit by bit daily to keep me in industry. Though this is stressful and takes a lot of energy from me because of the constant daily processing, I have no option.

Further, some of the participants noted that they were forced into seasonal jobs because of the lack of access to capital as indicated by Ayishetu (G2, 67yrs), 'But because we do not have our own capital to buy the kernels, we always wait for the season of shea kernels to pick and process.'

Risks in picking kernels

Another challenge identified by participants was snakes and other animal bites while picking kernels, as indicated by Fatima (G1, 56yrs), 'Sometimes picking of the kernels from the forest too is very challenging since most of us encounter snake bites and cuts from the grass in the bushes. This is also a very serious challenge.'

Gender discrimination in land ownership

The issue of gender-based land discrimination was raised by the participants. They noted that they could have developed their own shea farms if not because of gender-based land ownership discrimination as Ramatu (G3, 68yrs) stated, 'We don't get land to plant the shea trees just because we are women.' Ownership to farming lands for women in this industry has become increasingly important due to certain harmful land practices such as felling of shea trees as noted by Ajara (G3, 53yrs), 'The major challenge we face is the cutting down of the shea trees by some farmers and charcoal burners.'

Marketing products

A final challenge noted in this study is the lack of access to market for the women's produce, a situation that resulted in selling their products cheaply as noted by Amina (G1, 58yrs):

Market to buy our finished goods is one challenge. The local women buy our processed goods at cheap prices therefore we are appealing to government and other non-governmental organisations to come and buy our processed products at a valuable price to enable us get the required profit to motivate us.

Coping Mechanisms

Regardless of the challenges, the women demonstrated resilience by staying in the industry. About 45 of the women had been working in the industry for not less than 11years and 10 of them not less than 6 years. The coping mechanisms identified include: managing with little resources; buying raw materials on credit; and bit-by-bit processing.

Managing with little resources

One of the coping mechanisms to staying in the industry identified by the women is managing the little resources they had by 'cutting their coats according to their cloth' as mentioned by Ajara (G3, 53yrs); '...I cut my coat according to my cloth; I use the little resource I have now to buy kernels and process them.'

Some also reported picking the kernels by themselves as pointed out by Akosua (G4, 55yrs), 'If you are not able to buy the kernels, you manage with the little you are able to pick yourself from the bush to enable you stay in industry.'

Buying raw materials on credit

Buying on credit is identified as a coping mechanism as noted by Yawuri (G1, 66yrs), 'We sometimes buy some of the items on credit to process the shea butter and then make payments to those we buy from later, in bits, after we sell our processed goods.'

Bit-by-bit buying and processing

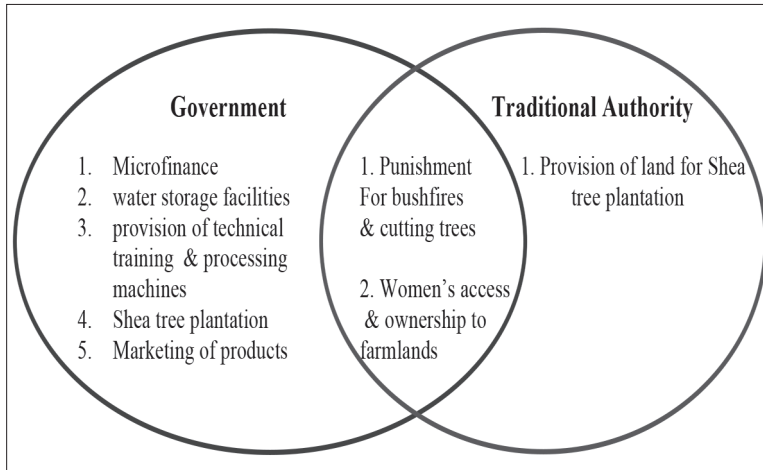
Another coping mechanism enabling them to stay in the shea industry is bit-by-bit buying and processing as indicated by Ayishatu (G1, 67yrs):

I process soap from the shea kernel. That is the only thing I do and sell for the up-keep of my family. I buy the ingredients for processing in bits—that is, small quantities and process it bit by bit daily to keep me in the industry, even though this is stressful and takes a lot of energy from me because of the constant daily processing.

Participants' recommendations

Participants proposed some recommendations that would be helpful to them as captured in Fig.1 below.

Fig.1: Participants' recommendations



Microfinance

One recommendation was for government to give the women loans to augment their resources in order to improve their business in the shea industry, as stated succinctly by Magajia (G1, 65yrs):

The government should give us loans to help us grow the industry, we know the government cannot give us free money but it should offer us loans to help boost our business and move the shea butter industry to a different dimension.

Water storage facilities

The women also requested for water storage facilities such as water reservoirs and harvesters to aid them in shea kernel processing.

Adiza (G1, 68yrs): Organisations or the government can also get us water harvesters to harvest rain water so that we can use the water for our business during the dry season when there are no rains.

Memunatu (G1, 54yrs): The government should also build us water reservoir or poly tanks to store the water during the rainy season so that we can use it. This will go a long way to boost our business.

Provision of technical training processing machines

A third request by the participants to the government is the provision of technical training in the form of processing, packaging, marketing, and record keeping. They believed these trainings could improve their business as described by Abibatu (G3, 60yrs), 'I think we need more training in marketing, packaging, record keeping, and other things that shea butter can be used for such as 'Omo', [detergent] key soap, [bar soap] B.F. and 'Asuma blows.'

Provision of processing machines was also suggested as a means to improve their business as discussed by Adiza (G1, 68yrs), 'The government should provide the group with machines, e.g. the machine used in processing the butter. These machines will help to boost the industry and increase our productivity.'

Land for shea plantation and formation of farm belt around shea trees

The participants recommended that traditional rulers such as the chiefs should release large acres of land to the government for shea kernel plantation as stated by Adama (G1, 55yrs), 'The chiefs should give the government a portion of land to enable it to do the shea kernel tree planting to enable us get bountiful harvest to boost our business.' Participants are of the view that shea plantation and a farm belt to protect shea tree production area could boost their shea business as asserted by Yawuri (G1, 67yrs), 'A farm belt should be made around that portion of land given to the government for the shea kernel tree planting so that the planted shea trees can be protected to enable us grow in our business.'

Punishment for bush fires and tree felling

The women implored both the government and the traditional authority to pass laws barring felling and burning of shea trees as asserted by Yawuri (G1, 67yrs):

A law should be given against anyone who farms in the portion given for shea kernel tree planting and a fine should be imposed on those who indulge in bush burning.

Women's access and ownership to farmlands

The women also requested for women's access to land ownership as noted in Ajara's (G3, 53yrs) statement, 'I think the government and our elders in the area should help us get lands to enable us plant more of the shea trees.'

Marketing products

Study participants recommended that the government provide marketing avenues to increase their profits as noted by Amina (G1, 58yrs):

The local women buy our processed goods at a cheap price therefore we are appealing to government and non-governmental organisations to come and buy our processed products at a valuable price to enable us get the required profit to motivate us.

Discussion

Employment, which is an element of empowerment (picking shea kernels and processing them into butter), undoubtedly, was one of the important experiences reported by the women in the shea industry and this validates other studies (SNV, 2006). The majority of the women, who are mostly advanced in age (average age 55 years) and uneducated 42 (70%) hailed their job with descriptions such as ‘the ultimate job’; ‘lucrative job’; and ‘means a lot job’. On the other hand, some of the women were compelled into this form of employment since there were no other jobs in the area, coupled with the fact that it is more labour-intensive with little financial commitment. It is noteworthy that about 18(30%) of the participants had senior high school (WASSCE), Ordinary and Advanced level certificates and probably could have worked in other sectors that required some form of education if there were jobs in the area.

Another important finding is that, diverse and unique sources of savings and investments were identified in this study including buying, storing, and reselling of other food stuff; storing shea kernels and selling it either raw or processed during scarcity; investing proceeds from the shea industry in other ventures, especially farming and petty trading, which in turn increases income, savings and investment. Another source of savings is the money saved as a result of diverse domestic use of shea butter (see Table 2) some of which participants claimed could be very expensive. All of this strengthened participants’ economic capacities.

Table 2: Uses of Shea Butter

Category of Benefits	Domestic Uses of Shea Butter				
Kernelritional (Baba, 2008, Lovett, 2004)	Cooking kernelritious meals	Cooking oil	Cooking traditional meals		
Medicinal	For massage (pain/stress reliever)	Oil for baby care	Treating injuries, insect and snake bites		
Self-beautification (Baba, 2008, Lovett, 2004)	Hair care (hair cream)	Skin moisturiser	Hair relaxer	Anti-dandruff hair cream	Anti-breakage hair cream
Laundry and house cleaning	Washing soap	Bathing soap	Detergents for cleaning the floor, toilet and bathroom	Cleaning dishes	

The study finding suggests that the women were empowered by the income they earned from the shea industry as it gave them some form of power and control at home, relating to power dynamics and empowerment theory (Cornell Empowerment Group, 1989; Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2012). They provided for the basic needs (food, education, health care) (SNV, 2006) of their nuclear and extended families as well as lent money to non-relatives. Another interesting finding of this study is that the women lend money to their husbands for their farming activities as well as perform men's traditional role of providing for the family during scarcity since they could rely on the hoarded shea products and/or savings. All of this contributed to self-dignity and respect for the women.

The average income per month of 90GHS is very low, validating other studies that women in this industry earn generally lower incomes (Okolo, *et al.*, 2016; Suleman, 2008) due partly to the lack of processing machines and access to microfinance (Aculey, 2007; SNV, 2014)—challenges that were also identified in this study. These and other challenges (e.g., lack of bargaining power, low product prices) necessitated the formation of women's groups to empower them to gain access to funding and processing inputs to boost their work (Perakis, 2009; SNV, 2014). However, none of the 60 members of the four groups acknowledged ever accessing microfinance, although some indicated having received skills training to process shea butter for different products such as soap, detergent, cream. The study however identified advantages associated with working in groups including: quick processing and increased productivity; unity; sense of belonging and social capital; security and peace of mind; and skills development.

Other challenges associated with working in the shea industry in Kusuwgu area are noteworthy. The women travelled long distances as well as spent long periods of time in search of water and fuel wood which are essential elements for the shea kernel and butter processing. The study found that the women travelled for about an hour to and from water sources. Fuel wood presented much more challenge since participants travelled, on average, for two miles (to and from where the fuel wood was located) and for four hours in search of, and processing the fuel wood. Additionally, several hours were spent in processing the kernel and butter. This makes the work more tedious and cumbersome. The fact that the majority of the study participants were over 60 years old, (mean age is 55 years) complicated their condition, such that some of them reported having to pay for water and fuel wood thereby impacting more on the little income that they earned.

Another important finding of this study is gender-based land ownership discrimination, which affected the women in the shea industry contributing to their powerlessness. Ownership to farming lands for women in this industry has become increasingly important due to the extinction of the shea trees and certain harmful land practices such as felling and burning shea trees (Jasaw, 2014).

Study findings also suggest that the women who participated in this study were resilient. This is so because, regardless of the challenges in the industry as discussed

earlier, about 45 (75%) of the women had been in the industry not less than 11 years while 10 (17%) of them have been there not less than 6 years. Elements of resiliency in this study include the advantages of working in groups (unity, sense of belonging, mutual benefits, security and peace of mind); self-dignity and respect; ability to provide for their basic needs, most importantly that of their children, family and other people with their limited income which are all elements of the empowerment theory (Gutierrez & Lewis 1998; Wallerstein, 1992). Other elements of resilience are buying raw materials on credit due to lack of capital; and bit-by-bit buying and processing (also due to the lack of capital and the tedious processing nature work).

Elements of Empowerment

The summary of elements of the empowerment theory identified in this study are depicted in table 3 below.

Table 3: Elements of Empowerment

Elements	Details
Self-dignity and Respect	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ability to take care of their families 2. Respect among peers and families
Benefits of working in groups	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Unity, sense of belonging 2. Social capital 3. Increased productivity 4. Security and peace of mind 5. Skills development
Access to Employment	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Picking and selling of shea nuts 2. Processing and sale of shea butter
Access to income to provide for	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Basic needs 2. Children's educational needs 3. Healthcare 3. Lend money to husbands
Elements of Empowerment Desirable but not attained	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Access to capital 2. Access to land ownership

Recommendations and conclusion

This study, like any other, is not without limitations. Results cannot be generalised to the experiences of all women in the shea industry in the Kusuwgu area, the

Northern Region or the country as a whole, due to the sampling approach (purposive sampling) used. However, the study highlights key experiences of women in the shea industry which, if given attention to, could positively impact the lives of women in this sector, their families, communities and the country as a whole. The following recommendations are highlighted as ways to advance and sustain the shea industry.

Land is an important element in the shea industry. Land is needed to cultivate the shea tree and its products. The government should work hand-in-hand with traditional authorities, as recommended by study participants, to find ways to develop shea plantations in areas where the shea tree grows. It is also imperative to put up measures (such as punishment for burning and cutting shea trees) to sustain existing shea trees.

Ghana is said to have the potential to produce 90% of the world's shea kernels (Techno Serve Ghana, 2004), which means that Ghana is endowed with an economic resource that could be exploited and used as a vessel for substantial poverty reduction, especially in Northern Ghana where it is mostly grown. This potential is evident from the study through the women's experiences discussed in previous sections. Even with limited resources and access to essential elements for production and processing of shea kernels and butter, study participants' experiences were mostly positive.

Similarly, these two institutions could also consider measures to increase access and control of land (land ownership) for women, (develop alternative sources of water such as water harvesters and dams) and fuel for shea kernel and butter processing. These measures could boost shea tree production and possibly the kernel and the butter. Another recommendation is technical training in the form of processing, packaging, marketing, and record keeping which could improve the women's earnings in the shea industry.

For social work practitioners, it is recommended that they build the capacity of the women in the shea industry to access existing pro-poor programmes. Capacity building could be in the form of giving the women information about programmes they qualify for and how they could access them. For example, none of the 60 members of the four groups has ever accessed any microfinance facility. Social workers could resource these women with information about available microfinance institutions around the area, the services they offer as well as eligibility requirements. An example of this institution is Microfinance and Small Loans Centre, a government pro-poor microfinance programme available in all districts in Ghana. Social workers could go a step further to help to effectively develop these groups and teach them how to package their information in ways that could enhance their chances of accessing existing programmes.

The shea industry undoubtedly empowered the study participants socially and economically. Noteworthy is their enhanced ability to provide for their basic needs, that of their children as well as family and non-family members. Additionally, the reversal of traditional women's roles identified in this study, i.e. women providing

for the upkeep of their homes during scarcity periods as well as lending money to their husbands for their family activities is remarkable. Since these gains seem to be unsustainable due to practices such as gender-based land discrimination, unfriendly eco-practices and limited shea kernel and butter processing materials and equipment, government intervention is imperative to tap the potential of the shea industry to reduce poverty in Northern Ghana.

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