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Rural Women and Development in Africa; An Interpretative Essay

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Beginning with Ester Boserup's seminal study, Women's Role in Economic Development in 1970, there has been an explosion of literature on the role of women in development, particularly on women in Africa. The 1970s witnessed the "discovery" of women-- by development agencies and planners, academics and fieldworkers. As with so many 'discoveries', it now seems so obvious that one wonders how the role of women was for so long overlooked. Not only do they make up nearly 52 percent of the world's population, in Africa "... 60 to 80 per cent of all agricultural work is done by women, and in developing countries as a whole, rural women account for at least 50 per cent of food production".¹

In other words, women are central to the rural crisis and problems of food production, security and distribution in Africa. As one ILO report notes, "Rural development in Africa is inconceivable without the active participation of women".² But are the numerous analyses of women in African rural development undertaken during the 1970s and 1980s having any real impact? This paper argues that despite all the rhetoric and good intentions, the 'problems' those studies defined persist because the solutions necessitate fundamental changes to the organization of labour and the family.

In large measure women's work remains 'invisible' because it is incorporated within the so-called domestic sector, i.e. the household, and rarely enters the market sector.³ Consequently, women's contribution to national output is not enumerated in national or development statistics, be it in Nigeria or Australia. This is because appropriation of their unpaid and/or undervalued contribution is central to the maintenance of the economic system.

Production in Africa, as in most places, is based on the division of labour by age and gender. Like all complementary systems, it is essentially asymmetrical. In other words, it masks the exploitation of one by the other:

Women's work:

Men's work

agricultural production

planting

clearing new land

weeding

harvesting staples

harvesting prestige crops

storage

¹ United Nations, Office of Public Information, International Women's Decade, No. 22, 13 February, 1980.

² ILO, Rural development and women in Africa (Geneva, 1984), 1.

³ D.Dorward, Women: Development Experience in the Third World (Geelong, Deakin 1984).

Distribution:

produce preparation	long distance trade
marketing of	prestige goods
produce	inc. "skilled" craft items
foodstuffs	
"cottage" crafts	
others	

Craft Production

manufacture of labour intensive commodities;	manufacture of culturally defined 'higher technology' production;
pottery	e.g. smithing/smelting
basketry	pottery were so defined
lint production and spinning	
Weaving (single heddle loom)	weaving (double heddle loom)

Private vs Public Domain

"Domestic" tasks (Double-Day)	"Public" duties
cooking	government
cleaning	defence
child birth and	ritual
child care	
ancillary tasks;	
collection of fuel (wood)	hunting
collection of water	

'Ownership'

Domestic utensils	Land
Poultry and small animals	prestige animals e.g. Horses, Cattle,
Basic agricultural equipment; e.g. weeding hoes	Specialized tools and weapons
Cottage craft equipment inc. domestic looms	smithy trade looms dye pits

As this simple list illustrates, women's work is habitually centred on the more labour intensive and underpaid or unremunerated tasks, while men's work is, by cultural definition, the more prestigious and rewarding, materially and psychologically.

This is most obvious in the contrasts between the "Domestic" and "Public" arena. Turning to a more clearly economic systems of production, the removal of cotton seeds from the bolls, cleaning the lint and spinning thread are generally 'women's work', to be carried out within the household, while men weave low-value thread into high-value cloth. When not actually excluded from the processes of weaving, women are confined to the less efficient single heddle loom.

Universally throughout Africa, women are culturally excluded from weaving on the more productive double-heddle loom. It is generally said that it would be *unseemly* for a woman to adopt the position necessary to operate a double-heddle loom,-- the type of argument put forward by many trade unionists in their opposition to female co-workers.

In the field of agriculture, men are responsible for clearing new fields and thereby acquire 'ownership' of the fields which their wives and kinswomen cultivate. This is just as true of matrilineal as patrilineal societies. As you are no doubt aware, even in matrilineal societies inheritance rights to land and valuables tend to pass from mother's brothers to sister's sons, not mother to daughters. It is this 'ownership' of the land which is the basis of male claims to ownership of agricultural production. Or to put it another way, women acquire access to land through men and are thus dependent upon them. Women have rights to produce of the land as an extension of their domestic 'obligations', i.e. in the preparation of meals. This does not necessarily give women the right to dispose of that produce outside the household for purposes other than household needs.

In pre-colonial times this sexual division of labour and its ramifications for control of production might appear to have a greater rationale and been less exploitative than today.⁴ This was because indigenous subsistence economy was essentially a domestic economy. Consequently, women's work and productivity were not marginal to the general economy. The much vaunted role of West African women in indigenous marketing arises directly from their domestic obligations. The material market place and its function was an extension of the domestic subsistence economy, the household sphere of women. Its function and operation should not be equated with the broader conceptual 'market concept' of neo-classical economics. One must be careful not to idealize the precolonial situation. Then, as now, women did a disproportionate share of the most labour intensive activities, while men enjoyed a disproportionate share of the amenity society had to offer. . However, within the domestic sphere, women were better placed to bring pressure upon their husband and kinsmen.

Colonialism, or more accurately the incorporation of Africans into the global economy, initiated fundamental changes to the relations of production within the system based on the sexual division of labour. A dominant market economy was established which subsumed the domestic subsistence sector. Moreover this process was not gender neutral. The modern market economy which the colonial powers sought to impose was rooted in an existence of an unpaid female 'domestic' sector, be it amongst the middle- and working- classes of Europe or Africa. Women provided unpaid domestic labour, looked after the house, cared for children, the old and infirmed, and more often than not contributed directly to income generating activities of husband and kinsmen. The marginalization of women's contribution to production and their claims to rewards does not bear a casual but a causal relationship to the system. In turn, the economic system was informed by a body of overarching

⁴ M.R.Cutrufelli, Women of Africa: Roots of Oppression(London; Zed, 1983), contains a useful overview of the position of women in traditional society.

androcentric cultural assumptions regarding the roles, rights and status of men and women, but more of that later.

Food production for African consumption was part of the household or subsistence economy. It was taken for granted, though structurally it was central to the economic system. Cheap food produced by unpaid female labour made possible low wages for male labour (in the mining, plantation and urban sectors). It also facilitated low producer prices for export 'cash crops'. Yet, to the extent that African males were able to transfer the social and economic costs to women, they were cushioned from the direct effects.

Post-colonial governments are heirs to the same system but confronted with harsher economic terms of trade and the political realities of having to confront popular opposition, if not always at the ballot box, then from the barracks. "Development" has been defined and continues to be measured largely in terms of export earnings and balance of trade. This means holding down costs, in terms of labour and materials. It should also be noted that agricultural export production has generally increased over late colonial levels, even at times when famine appears to stalk the land.

The argument for greater involvement of African women in development, particularly rural development, is that most African countries are now food importers. A large proportion of African foreign exchange goes toward the costs of importing foodstuffs, where once African was self-sufficient. Since women are the primary food producers, an increase in their productivity will help offset this drain on exchange. In theory it should be welcomed by urban planners, bureaucrats and politicians, *et al*, whose life style is dependent upon imported luxuries, technology and industrial in-puts. However that is to lose sight of the social consequences of such a reallocation between gender of control over resources. What foreign development planners and aid agencies are asking of African governments and elites is a major social revolution of a magnitude beyond that which has been undertaken in developed countries. They are asking African men of all classes and groups to surrender their economic, social and, eventually, their political high-ground. They are calling for the transformation of those major institutions whereby men are able to control women and appropriate the surplus of women's work. African policy makers and implementors are not operating in a socio-political vacuum, cut off from the culture in which they live. The costs of continuing food imports needs to be set against the price of a significant reallocation of control of resources toward food producers, the women.

The colonial system was exploitative of both men and women. But it tended to favour men over women, enabling African men to exercise a greater degree of social, jurial, economic and political control over their women than they had previously. African men were not simply the happy recipients of colonial favour, they actively manipulated the new colonial institutions to enhance their position *viz a viz* their wives and kinswomen. Thus with the expansion of cash-crop production, produce which had hitherto been part of the domestic economy, such as groundnuts (peanuts), were transformed into 'prestige' crops and the male sphere. Similarly 'new' crops, such as cocoa and tea, were taken over from the onset as 'male crops', albeit women continued to carry out most of the labour intensive tasks such as planting, weeding, harvesting and

processing. Male rights over the disposal /sale of produce was upheld in the male dominated 'Native Administration' and assumed as axiomatic by colonial administrators .

The notion of 'farmer' as denoting a male, with women simply 'assisting', has dominated the literature on agriculture and development until very recently. It is really part of a more general male bias which assumes women are dependent persons and non-economic beings. This male bias has been institutionalized with agricultural training courses and extension services being targeted to men in rural areas, even though the women do the bulk of the farming. As a result, most of this effort and information is simply 'lost'. Furthermore, most of the training and extension information is so male-encoded that it is often of dubious value to women even when they have access to it. This is because it isn't directed to women or their needs. Moreover, it assumes availability of resources which women are denied.

The basic resource which African rural women lack is land. The tenure system which evolved under colonialism was at best a variant of male-dominated 'communal' ownership, increasingly superseded by privatization of land. Yet to grant women rights over land would not only involve economic costs, assuming the current male 'owners' were to be compensated, it would involve a social cost. It would overturn one of a major institution of male dominance and therefore it is an issue which unifies African men across class and ethnic gulfs. Even when programmes of rural land redistribution are introduced, such as in Senegal, it operate through existing institutions which are male dominated and therefore land passes into the hands of men.⁵ "In...ujamaa villages, a family's membership, land rights and communal labor obligations and workpoints are usually registered in the name of the head of the household. No married woman is recognized as a household head".⁶ Moreoften, the development of commercial agriculture has led to increasing rural differentiation and control by an urban elite who are dependent upon a supply of cheap labour. It is this ruling class who have been the principal beneficiaries of capital intensive agricultural development in the past. As a result, female food producers have been increasing relegated to the less fertile tracts.

The response to the rural crisis by rural males is often out migration in search of wage labour, virtually abandoning their families to the care of their womenfolk. In effect, this has resulted in the feminisation of agriculture and family institutions. While the African family is ideologically patriarchal, it has been estimates that up to a third of the households in Africa are now headed by women.⁷ Deprived of men's work assistance, in such areas as the clearing of

⁵ Fama Hane Ba, Aminata Mbengue Ndiaye, Marie-Angelique Savane and Awe Thiongane, "The impact of territorial administration reform on the situation of women in Senegal", in Rural development and women in Africa (Geneva; ILO, 1984), pp. 107-115.

⁶ Jeanne Henn, 'Women in the rural economy; past, present and future', African Women South of the Sahara, eds. M.J. Hay and S. Strichter (London; Longman, 1984), p.17.

⁷ Jasleen Dhamija, "Income-Generating Activities ", Rural Development and women in Africa (Geneva; ILO, 1984), p.34. While often regarded as a South African or southern African phenomenon, a 1972 ILO study showed that over a half million households in Kenya were headed by women. ILO, Employment, Incomes and Equality (1972).

new farmland, female food producers are confronted with an increase in their burden. Yet, once again, to rectify the situation is to require the elite to surrender their self interests or at least part of their advantages. Alternatively, mechanisms would need to be devised to require migrant men to shoulder part of the responsibilities from which they have fled, in turn necessitating increased wage levels if they are to do so.

In order to offset part of this increased burden upon women, some planners have called for the development of appropriate technologies to lighten the burden of women's 'domestic' workload,--the "double-day" of field and family,--the threefold tasks of farming, household work and child care. Nevertheless, development strategists insist, "...rural women appear to be an underutilised human resource. If given better technical and social training, they could make a greater contribution both to agriculture and rural development...".⁸ Appropriate technology, it is argued, will 'free' women's time and energies for increased food production. The areas most commonly targeted are ;

- (a) the provision of better access to child care facilities.
 - (b) the provision of better public health services.
 - (c) labour saving techniques and devices for reducing time and labour expenses on food preparation.
- and linked to (c),
- (d) access to fuel,
 - (e) access to ready supply of clean water.

Probably the most taxing 'domestic' tasks which African rural women perform is the almost daily collection of wood (for cooking fuel) and water, often carrying heavy loads over long distances. [Africa is facing a major fuel crisis and aridity with increased deforestation, but that is another issue. ⁹]

Of course, all the above cost money and would require a reallocation of resources. Even the most rudimentary health delivery system is costly, while many planners would argue that African can ill afford its current educational programmes, never mind increased child care services. Moreover, even the most modest technological aid, which would appear to be non-controversial viewed from outside the society, can be threatening to the rural male population. As socio-economic differentiation widens, those who have little cling even more tenaciously to their few vestiges of precarious status. Helena Eversole recounts an experience of a hand operated pump installed at a project in rural Tanzania, at the request of the local women, which kept breaking down. After repeated 'accidents', the aid agency came to realize, "... it was the men. The men were not crazy about the fact that the women had a lot of extra time on their hands so they could talk together... and discuss matters of consequence." ¹⁰

⁸ Ruza First-Dilic, "Modes of Production, Agrarian Structures and Women Work; Rural Women in Yugoslavia", in Women in Rural Development: Critical Issues (Geneva; ILO, 1980), p. 2.

⁹ Bina Agarwal, Cold Hearths and Barren Slopes: The Woodfuel Crisis in the Third World (London; Zed, 1986)

¹⁰ Helena Eversole, "NGO Aid; Making the Rhetoric a Reality", in Women, Aid and Development: Proceedings of a Workshop (Canberra; Women and Development Network of Australia, 1984), p. 91.

If rural male Tanzanians find a hand-pump threatening, what reaction would a significant reallocation of resources to female foodstuff producers evoke?

Appropriate technology can help, but it is rather like resorting to the deck chairs on the Titanic. As Irene Davies recently remarked, Technology is clearly very important and it may alleviate women's work but it does not provide a solution not does it which is money and technology.¹¹

Female farmers confront the perennial agrarian problem of access to credit. However one only needs consider the difficulties which farm support presents for wealthy Western governments to realize their limitations. It is not credit but more equitable producer prices that are the solution. However that leads to thorny political problems- such as riots in the cities when food prices go up.

For many women in rural Africa the solution has been to follow the example of their menfolk and migrate to the cities.¹² Its an old story, well documented since the 1960s, and is by no means a response exclusive to African rural women. However, while it may provide a tolerable alternative for the individual, it is hardly a societal solution. On the other hand, it points to the looming reality that the rural areas of Africa can no longer contain the 'problem of women' and others who have been marginalized in the processes of 'development'. There just isn't enough arable land for Africa's growing population to continue to practice hoe farming.

For many planners, the solution is in 'controlling' the population explosion, by which they generally mean some form of birth control. Much is made of Westerner's 'insensitivity' toward local attitudes for the failure of such schemes, which misses the point. Outsiders are often insensitive. However, the reason birth-control *per se* generally fails as a strategy, is that it attacks the symptom, rather than the cause. The persistence of high birth rates, even when the problem of infant mortality has been dramatically reduced, is not a hang-over of some cultural predilection. It is a rational economic response by the poor to their plight. It is the poverty which needs to be addressed.

One solution to the land shortage and birth-rate is providing rural women with alternative employment. This have proved a fertile area for developers and aid agencies. Unfortunately many of these projects are simply income-preserving, rather than income-generating activities. They help women utilize what limited resources are already available to the household more efficiently and economically, but don't expand the economic base. Even when they are income generating, they tend to be low-income generating activities which merely pit one group of rural women in competition with another to produce low unit value goods and services; craft industries and food processing-preparation. Invariably when there is any significant money to be derived, men use their political and

¹¹ Irene Davies, "Women and Subsistence Agriculture:", in Women, Aid and Development: Proceedings of a Workshop (Canberra; Women and Development Network of Australia, 1984, pp. 42-43.

¹² Christine Obbo, African Women: Their struggle for economic independence (London; Zed, 1980).

social power to take over the sector, utilizing the domestic labour of their womenfolk or employ capital-intensive technology.

That men are able to appropriate women's labour and enterprise is in part facilitated by cultural attitudes of male superiority. To the extent that women are socialized into the patriarchal system, they often willingly acquiesce in their own subordination. However the notion that "women are constricted by the remnants of the traditional perceptions of women's role and the sexual division of labour" is as much *our* myth as *theirs*. It ignores the dynamics of culture and culture change, as well as the frequency with which women, particularly African women, fail to adhere in practice to such strictures when it is not to their advantage. It is not so much the cause as the justification for inequalities, the rectification of which is rooted in political-economic decisions.

The political-economic decisions which are required are fraught with difficulties which make IMF/World Bank strictures pale into insignificance. Better to set up a Women's Bureau, the type of tokenism of which Australian politicians are so fond.

I wish I could end on as hopeful a tone as that which pervades Women and Work in Africa¹³ or so many aid seminar papers. Politically, socially and economically, women in Africa are worse off than men and the disparity is growing. Moreover, the achievement of female equality is not amenable to simple solutions, such as improved educational opportunities or increased female participation in development projects. Female exploitation is rooted in the very fabric of modern political economy, as it has evolved in Africa and elsewhere. Female equality of access to opportunities and resources will necessitate fundamental changes in cultural values and the organization of relationship of production within the family and society at large.

¹³ Edna Bay, ed., Women and Work in Africa (Boulder; Westview, 1982).

