

RATIONAL ACTORS OR MORAL ECONOMISTS:
GENDER RELATIONS AND THE PEASANT FAMILY
IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

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Scholars of large scale peasant societies have traditionally viewed peasants as falling into one of two schools. The first school, the most famous proponent of which is Samuel Popkin, views peasants as rational actors. Popkin's extensive study of the peasant societies of Vietnam led him to view peasants as self-interested, rational, and willing to forego security today in the interest of future profit. His political economy model rejected the notion of the market as the harbinger of destruction and despair and the village as a bastion of security and benevolence. He asserted that peasants see markets as potential sources of personal advancement. Furthermore, because they are in constant competition with one another for scarce resources, they view one another as threatening and perceptions of individual gain determine the nature and extent of collective action.

The second school of scholars uses the notion of a "moral economy" to explain the puzzling technical, social, and moral arrangements that govern peasant society. Taking their cue from James Scott's *Moral Economy of the Peasant* as well as such theorists as Michael Lipton and Karl Polanyi, these scholars characterize peasants as communitarian in outlook, risk-averse, and reluctant to innovate. They conclude that colonialism, the expansion of markets, and the formation of central states exert a malevolent effect on pre-existing peasant social structures.

Although both schools of thought provide valuable insights into the normative basis of peasant society, they both fail to address the issue of gender. Neither makes specific mention of women, the sexual division of labor, or the important contributions that women make to rural incomes. This is troubling in light of the fact that FAO (United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization) statistics indicate that women grow half of the world's food. In Latin America, North Africa, and the Middle East they constitute between 20 and 25 percent of the agricultural labor force; in Asia they constitute forty percent; and in sub-Saharan Africa they are fully half. In rural villages, women's agricultural and domestic work may take up nearly three times as much time as work done by men.¹ Furthermore, due to divorce, migration, abandonment, and death, increasing numbers of women are the primary, if not the sole, providers of income. Therefore, no examination of the normative basis of peasant society can be considered complete without a gender-disaggregated view.

This paper will evaluate the claims made by political economists and moral economists, paying particular attention to the work of Samuel Popkin and James Scott, in order to examine how gender issues reinforce, dispute, or merely modify the rational versus moral debate. I propose to examine the situation of peasant women in sub-Saharan Africa in order to determine which perspective most accurately reflects the range of opportunities, options, and constraints that typify their lives.

Data reveal that 80-90% of the poor in Africa live in rural areas and female-headed households comprise well over 50% of the rural poor. African peasant women contribute an estimated 75% of the labor required to produce the food consumed in Africa--mostly under conditions of primitive hand-hoe technology and low labor productivity. Capitalism, private property, and the market economy have penetrated these villages to an enormous degree. Given the number and concentration of female peasants, sub-Saharan Africa is ideal for assessing the applicability of the theories in light of women's issues and concerns.

Gender Relations and the Peasant Family

There are a number of implicit assumptions in both the moral and political economy conceptions about the nature of household decision-making, how costs and benefits are distributed within the household, and what type of access peasants have to land, labor, and capital. The following two quotes are illustrative of the hidden assumptions about gender relations contained in both works. The first, from James Scott, asserts:

The distinctive economic behavior of the subsistence-oriented peasant family results from the fact that, unlike a capitalist enterprise, it is a unit of consumption as well as a unit of production. The family begins with a more or less irreducible subsistence consumer demand, based on its size that it must meet in order to continue as a unit. Meeting those minimal human needs in a reliable and stable way is the central criterion which knits together choices of seed, technique, timing, rotation and so forth. The cost of failure for those near the subsistence margin is such that safety and reliability take precedence over long-run profit.²

Popkin writes:

[P]easants see in one another sufficient uncertainty or threat to make social interactions difficult. Moreover, the range of persons for whom peasants make sacrifices (or for whom they do not keep strict accounts) is narrow and generally limited to family units that cook and eat together and that pool many of their day-to-day resources. . . . I assume that a peasant is primarily concerned with the welfare and security of self and family. Whatever his broad values and objectives, when a peasant takes into account the likelihood of receiving the preferred outcomes *on the basis of individual actions*, he usually will act in a self-interested manner. . . . [I] specifically focus on rationality from the point of view of the individual, for what is rational for an individual may be very different from what is rational for an entire village or collective.³

Despite the fact that the two authors wish to communicate opposing views of the nature of village/family relations, they both assume that spouses have similar rights over and obligations to children, households are necessarily corporate units, a man's chief obligation is to his wife and children, and marriage gives rise to a unit marked by joint control and management of resources and similarity or coincidence of interests and goals. Furthermore, both authors imply that men are the primary breadwinners with women and children working alongside to supplement family income.⁴ It is assumed that the person with primary responsibility for ensuring that subsistence needs are met is the same one who makes vital decisions about it.⁵ However, FAO statistics indicate that although African women provide 90 percent of the labor for processing food crops and providing household water and fuel wood; 80 percent of the labor in food storage and transport from farm to village; 90 percent of the work in hoeing and weeding; and 60 percent of the work in harvesting and marketing, they do not have access to basic inputs of production like land, credit and fertilizer, labor, or the legal right to grow cash or export crops. Nevertheless, they must take almost complete responsibility for the welfare of their households.

Men command the factors of production given their almost exclusive rights to own land, mobilize labor and technology, and acquire inputs, information, and services. They, not their wives, make decisions about the allocation of family resources. This exerts profound influence on the nature, source, size, and distribution of income within the family as well as the patterns of consumption, savings, and

investment that result. Thus, by focusing on the household as the unit of decision-making and productive activity the implications of these intra-household effects on behavior are overlooked.⁶

Furthermore, women, in addition to having their ability to maximize utility extremely constrained, may suffer a decline in welfare given their husband's decision to seek increased income. Both the moral and political economy approaches assume that families operate as joint decision-making units that distribute costs and benefits equally. In sub-Saharan Africa, this is by no means a typical scenario. It is not correct to assume that joint control is exercised over household income or that men and women allocate resources in the same way. Studies conducted by the World Bank in Kenya show that men and women spend household income differently: women give greater priority to food and children's education than do their husbands. In Cameroon, men are not held socially responsible for the family's basic food security.⁷ Therefore, what is rational and beneficial for the welfare of a man may involve increased exploitation and a deterioration in welfare for his wife and children. As Ostergaard puts it:

Wives are more constrained in their income allocation strategies partly because of their close ideological association with their children's welfare. . . . [T]he literature also emphasizes the small amounts of personal spending mothers allow themselves, even when their needs are pressing. . . . Men, on the other hand, claim a right to personal spending money whether or not they earn a wage. . . . Peasant producers and subsistence farmers almost everywhere have a right to expend family resources on conviviality and status consumption.⁸

For example, in 1985 Nigeria adopted a structural adjustment package that mandated an increased emphasis on agriculture, particularly cash crop production for export. The objective of the new Agricultural Development Policy (A.D.P.) was to increase agricultural production and increase farm incomes. In order to motivate farmers to participate, other services such as land development, credit services, and inputs were also provided. Studies conducted by agricultural extension agents show that peasants responded to the ADP incentives and switched to cash cropping. However, the introduction of capitalist farming ushered in new intra-household exchange relations which had a deleterious effect on women's welfare. Men's increased involvement in cash and nonfood crop production for export to urban, national, and international markets resulted in women being pushed further and further into the domestic sphere with little or no access to productive resources.

Women were increasingly restricted to producing food for family consumption on marginal lands while men, encouraged by their increased access to productive resources in the public domain, became more involved with producing crops for export.⁹ Ingrid Palmer found that the separation of domestic and public spheres that occurred due to the introduction of capitalist farming resulted in women being restricted to the production of goods and services required by the household. This sexual division of labor made women even more dependent upon men and reduced their social and economic status.

Furthermore, the increased prosperity a male peasant may enjoy as a result of the switch from subsistence to cash cropping does not necessarily "trickle down" to his wife (or wives) and children as both the moral and rational economists assume. In some African cultures, a man's chief obligation is to his lineage and male kin or to his mother rather than his wife. He may also keep his increased earnings for himself. In Tanzania, for example, although women constitute the majority of agricultural producers, they do not automatically benefit from improvements in the agricultural sector--especially improvements of cash crops which are mainly controlled by men. Recent studies show that increased producer prices, although they motivated farmers to increase production, did not generate improvements in household income:

Given a man's divided loyalties, a husband may allocate his income in a way which does not correspond to the immediate needs of the conjugal unit or his family procreation. For instance, he may pour his resources into his own kin. . . . [He] may adopt a strategy that focuses on providing for his children (particularly his sons) but not his wife; she may be expected to make do on the minimum or to be an independent earner.¹⁰

Another issue of concern for both moral and political economists is to determine how much risk peasants are willing to assume. The central tenet of the moral economy approach is that of the subsistence ethic. Scott maintains that the shortage of food that characterizes pre-capitalist peasant societies has conditioned their members to use any and all means to keep their income from falling below subsistence. Relationships with neighbors, elites, and the state are evaluated in terms of how they hinder or help peasants retain a modicum of stability. Thus, peasants prefer to minimize risk rather than maximize returns. Therefore, moral economists predict that peasants will be content with the lower (but stable) returns from subsistence production rather than assume the risks that accompany cash cropping. Because a successful

subsistence crop guarantees the family food supply while the value of cash crops depends on market prices and the prices of consumer goods, peasants will be reluctant to undertake cash crop ventures.¹¹

Political economists put forth an alternative thesis. They hypothesize that although peasants are interested in avoiding uncertainty, they still engage in risk-seeking behavior to achieve future prosperity. Popkin, for example, found that peasant families did not become involved in commercial agriculture solely out of desperation. Rather, they viewed commercial agriculture as yet another opportunity for advancement. He writes:

Indeed, the expansion of markets is frequently of particular benefit to poorer peasants, while it is large lords and patrons who prevent market involvement by peasants in order to protect their own control of the economy.¹²

The analysis of both approaches is lacking because neither takes into account that *women*, not men, are primarily responsible for procuring adequate subsistence, and *men*, not women, are primarily responsible for decision-making. Studies conducted in Kenya, Zaire, and Malawi, where women do most if not all of the subsistence farming, indicate that women, when given the opportunity, would be willing to engage in risky investments or gambles, (but that they are denied access to land and productive capital in all three countries). In Kenya, only 5% of the land titles are in the name of women. Women borrowers represent only 10% of all loanees.¹³ In Malawi, women-headed households are a small fraction of those receiving seasonal credit despite the fact that they are one-third of the total number of households.¹⁴ In Zaire, a woman cannot borrow institutional credit without the written permission of her husband. Furthermore, all agricultural extension agents are men despite the fact that women are primarily responsible for food production. Services are aimed exclusively at men on the erroneous assumption that they will pass information along to women. Although women represent up to 80% of all food producers in some countries, the FAO reports that they are known to receive only 1-2% of extension contracts.¹⁵

Thus, it is difficult to assess whether women are risk averse or not because their ability to make decisions is so limited. Studies have shown that women living at the margins are willing to engage in risks in order to ensure future benefits. However, the complex array of political and social constraints that keep women from even entertaining the idea of changing their economic circumstances makes it difficult to judge their willingness to assume risk. United States Agency for International Development (USAID) evaluations demonstrate that one

reason women may not switch from subsistence to export crops is not so much their fear of falling below subsistence, but the fact that crops are segregated by gender. Women are not confident that they will be able to dispose of certain crops as they wish if these crops are seen as men's crops. This was found to be the case in southern Africa, where women avoided allocating their labor to corn in favor of other crops where ownership was unambiguously theirs.¹⁶ Similarly, in Zambia, the high price of maize (a man's crop) led many men to increase the size of land planted with maize. Their wives, however, continued to cultivate groundnuts, despite the heavier labor requirements, because they could sell them on the informal market and control the resulting income.¹⁷

However, when given a fair chance, female peasants do not necessarily reject the advance of capitalism and the accompanying opportunities even though these ideas may threaten their subsistence more than any other segment of the peasant community (with the possible exception of their daughters). Peasant women have shown remarkable willingness and enthusiasm for modern innovation. Furthermore, female peasants do not, any more than their male counterparts, have a "traditional distaste of buying and selling and a millennial dream of community property."¹⁸ Nor is the pre-capitalist closed economy their utopian goal. As Elson noted:

The market appears to treat women as individuals in their own right. If women can sell their labor or their products and get a cash income of their own, this lessens their economic dependence upon men, increases their economic value, and may increase their bargaining power within the household. Access to an income of their own tends to be highly valued by women, not only for what it buys, but also for the greater dignity it brings.¹⁹

Indeed, women respond more quickly, efficiently, and positively to new market opportunities by increasing food production than do men.²⁰ Powerful women's organizations in Nigeria, Kenya, and Cameroon have pressed for village-level income-generating projects, promoted rural-based technologies, increased educational opportunities, and pressed for giving women the same access to land, labor, and technology as men enjoy. It is not the case that women and markets have an inherently inimical relationship. It is simply the case that, as a group, women have less access to crucial resources than do men. The power position of men and their differential access to resources are

facilitated by their roots in local cultural and political patterns which exclude women from ownership.

Thus, the focus on "individual decision-making" and "individual choice" that is characteristic of both moral and political economy approaches is misplaced in light of the complex cultural, social, and political barriers that women face. Their cultural and legal exclusion from the means of production, their responsibility for the birth, care, and feeding of children, and their lack of authority over their own lives, make it very difficult to talk about "individualism" and "choice" in any meaningful fashion. It is easier for males to behave as rational, utility-maximizing individuals because women shoulder the sole responsibility for reproducing human resources and the vast majority of the responsibility for ensuring their welfare. As Elson points out, while available evidence shows that rural producers will switch from one crop to another in response to changing relative prices, women cannot easily abandon their responsibilities in the home simply because other avenues become more profitable. As Vickers notes, "there is a limit to the extent to which women can switch from human resource production and maintenance to crop production . . . children will not be left unattended because another crop becomes more profitable."²¹ Risks and benefits are not evenly distributed across familial units and women who live on their own are often excluded (*de facto* and *de jure*) from exercising their option to assume risk. The question of whether or not peasants will adhere to the "safety first" principle must be reexamined.

Another issue with which both moral and political economists are concerned is that of how commercialization affects peasants. Moral economists see the introduction of markets and capitalism as having a negative effect on village life. Political economists argue the opposite. The following passage is fairly typical of how moral economists view the market:

[S]tate formation, capitalism, and colonialism . . . harm peasant welfare, for they increase inequality and stratification and force more and more peasants into isolated and atomized positions without the insurance and protection of their traditional institutions.²²

Political economists, on the other hand, believe:

[T]he expansion of markets is frequently of particular benefit to poorer peasants, while it is large lords and patrons who prevent market involvement by peasants in order to protect their own control of the economy.²³

However, both moral and political economists incorrectly assume that women and men are affected in the same ways by the process of commercialization. This is not the case. In sub-Saharan Africa, the transition from closed to open villages has meant increased labor and decreased security for women. The loss of communal land rights has been especially damaging to women who do not have the necessary money, capital, or legal right to even consider becoming land owners themselves. The change from closed to open villages has meant the end of women's access to traditional forms of security and has left them unable to take advantage of new opportunities. Furthermore, the advance of capitalism has created new and different types of work that women are expected to perform in addition to their traditional responsibilities. They may or may not receive adequate remuneration. As Sen and Grown have observed:

In rural areas women's access to land, labour, and technology, credit, and other inputs into cultivation appears to have worsened in many parts of the third world. When land reforms have been undertaken, they have often *reduced* women's control over land by ignoring their traditional land use rights and giving land titles solely to male heads of households.... Where agricultural mechanization has occurred, it worsens or at best does not improve women's absolute and relative economic position. Mechanization of food-processing technologies often drastically reduced women's employment and income. In some cases, even the general premise that women and men will be affected in the same direction by processes of commercialization cannot be upheld. In parts of West Africa the introduction of cash crops has improved the economic position of some men but worsened the income and work status of women from the same household. Women's workloads in tasks such as fuel gathering and water collection have in fact tended to increase with "development."²⁴

Closer examination of case studies from a variety of sub-Saharan African countries shows that the commoditization process has undermined communal forms of property and eroded the resource base of kin groups. Land markets have resulted in the loss of familial control over land-use rights. Furthermore, women's claims on kin resources appear to have eroded more swiftly than men's. Miriam Goheen's study of women agriculturalists in Nso, Cameroon highlights the fact

that the introduction of cash crops, privatization, and the market economy has meant increased marginalization and exploitation of female peasants, despite the fact that they respond more quickly, efficiently, and positively to new market opportunities than do men. Goheen found that the traditional designation of women as primary food farmers and providers, although problematic, encouraged relative equality and complementarity between women and men. The changing material conditions as a result of the political economy of the marketplace and commoditization caused the complementary roles played by women and men to become much less equal. The changes in women's status and income resulted from women's decreased access to productive resources accompanied by a simultaneous increase in the demands on their labor and income. Goheen found that:

Women in Nso are discovering ironically that the very qualities which have assured their status and power are those which have been undermined and subverted by the marketplace and the increasing differential valuation of male and female work. (There are) contradictions in women's role as primary food farmers ... and there is now evident a feminization of poverty.²⁵

The aforementioned cases are fairly typical of events happening throughout sub-Saharan Africa. In light of these cases, we cannot unequivocally assert, as Popkin did, that peasants benefit from the introduction of capitalism. However, recognizing this deficiency in the Popkin argument, can we then conclude that Scott was correct in his assertion that:

...peasant welfare is most precarious in precisely those areas where commercial progress is most impressive because capitalism, commercialization of agrarian relation, and the centralizing state cut through the integument of subsistence customs and traditional social rights to replace them with contracts, the market, and uniform law?²⁶

It appears that, just as was the case in the open village, men and women in closed villages had different claim rights on land, labor, and capital. In much of patrilineal sub-Saharan Africa, a woman's access to land is by virtue of her status as a wife, while her husband's is by virtue of his lineage membership. Thus, wives have access to their husband's productive resources but these can easily be lost if a woman is barren, fails to produce sons, is widowed, or decides to divorce. Furthermore,

even though a woman may have the right to use land, she has no legal claim upon it. Thus, a woman runs the risk of improving the productivity of her allocated plot and then having another, poorer plot substituted for it without compensation.²⁷ Women may be forced to work for little or no compensation and may be forbidden to own oxen, tractors, and other modern farm implements.

Because both approaches fail to take a gender-disaggregated view, neither is exactly correct in their estimation of the transition from a closed to an open village. Political economists assume that peasant families necessarily behave as corporate units, with benefits accrued by the head necessarily "trickling down." Thus, they overestimate the ability of the poorest of the poor (i.e., women) to benefit from the transition from closed to open villages. Moral economists, on the other hand, do not take a nuanced view of the transition and incorrectly assume that peasants and markets invariably have an adversarial relationship. The gender of a peasant is a very important determinant of how he or she will fare in the open village.

The final issue that concerns moral and political economists is that of peasant rebellion. Each viewpoint offers a different explanation for the conditions under which peasants will protest as well as the aims of the protest. Moral economists view rural communities as stable systems that are invariably disrupted by the penetration of markets and commercial activity. This emphasis leads them to assume that the decline, decay, and/or erosion of bonds are necessary before new forms of organization take root in peasant communities. Furthermore, they emphasize that peasant protest is restorative rather than revolutionary, with peasants merely fighting to reclaim lost rights or privileges. Political economists argue that there is no need for a dramatic subsistence crisis before peasants in subsistence areas will support revolutionaries. They believe that, although peasants in subsistence areas may be less likely to generate new organizations themselves, once outside allies are available to provide the impetus they can be quite revolutionary.²⁸ Popkin, for example, maintained that political activity was not so much a question of the degree of misery as of the degree of organization. Furthermore, he saw peasant protests as oriented to securing new rights and privileges within the existing system.

It appears that, although political economists are overly sanguine about the effects of the introduction of capitalism on the poorest of the poor, and overly optimistic in their assessment of the ability of peasants to behave as individual decision-makers pursuing their goals rationally, they nevertheless make a more accurate assessment of the conditions leading toward peasant organization, innovation, and rebellion. There are very few cases of African female pastoralists engaging in massive protest against subsistence threats or economic crises, despite the fact it

is they who bear the brunt when economic disaster strikes. A United Nations' study showed that economic crises have a negative impact on women's role as citizens, particularly among poorer groups. Economic crises tend to force women to spend more time feeding and caring for their families and reduce their role in and the time they have to engage in political activity.²⁹ Evidence from women agriculturalists shows that the degree of political organization is of crucial importance in determining whether or not women will engage in protest activity. Traditional, service-oriented women's organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and grassroots organizations related to specific projects have developed a range of methods for reaching marginalized women. The presence or absence of such groups is a far better indicator of the degree of protest activity than the extent of the subsistence threat.

Furthermore, the emphasis moral economists place on the restorative nature of peasant protests is misplaced. Given that traditional village norms dictate that women have no access to productive resources, little voice in village decision-making, and little or no authority over themselves or their children, and despite the fact that in the past they may have had better access to land or worked shorter hours, protests waged by women agriculturalists are not restorative in nature. Women, instead, campaign for *increased* access to markets and credit, the right to own land for themselves. They welcome, rather than shun, visits from agricultural extension agents. Simply because rich (male) peasants are more likely to pursue innovation and gain from it, it does not automatically follow that the private ownership of new technologies and innovations will be of no benefit to smallholders. Thus, far from desiring a return to the old ways, as moral economists predict, women more often call for a taming of markets rather than their elimination or extermination. Life in the closed village (especially for women) is far from ideal. Illness, starvation, and death were, and still continue to be, regular occurrences. Villages were, and continue to be, rife with jealousy, conflict, and competition. The divergence of individual and group interests predated the arrival of the market as do stratification and exploitation. Thus, an accurate assessment of peasant society must move beyond some of the assumptions made by moral economists. The political economy model represents such a move. Political economists recognized that "economic man" exists both in the closed as well as the open village, and, furthermore, that the transition can have a variety of different consequences. However, both approaches, despite the insights they provide, do not paint a true picture of life in the village because of their failure to consider gender. An expanded view of men, women, and the sexual division of labor is needed if we are to gain any real understanding of peasant decision-making in Africa.

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