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WOMEN, LAND AND AGRICULTURE IN LESOTHO

by Paul Kishindo

**WOMEN IN PRODUCTION THE ECONOMIC ROLE OF
WOMEN IN NINETEENTH CENTURY LESOTHO**

by Elizabeth Eldredge

**MARXISM VERSUS THE PATRIARCHY: GENDER AND
HISTORICAL MATERIALISM IN SOUTHERN AFRICA**

by Marc Epprecht



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No. 4

WOMEN, LAND AND AGRICULTURE IN LESOTHO

WOMEN, LAND AND AGRICULTURE IN LESOTHO

Introduction

The population of Lesotho was estimated in 1991 at 1.9 million, and growing at an annual rate of 2.6% (Lesotho Population Data Sheet 1991). An estimated 84% of this population is rural, concentrated in the "lowlands", a narrow crescent of land lying along the western perimeter. Because of better economic prospects in South Africa, which completely surrounds it, the country has since the mid 1870s suffered from a high level of male labour migration. It is estimated that 40% of the male labour in the age group 20 - 39 is away in South Africa at any one time (Holland *et al* 1988:2). This labour is principally employed in the mines on contracts of between 6 - 18 months, which may be renewable. Migrant remittances play a very important role in the country's economy: in 1990, for example, migrant remittances contributed 43.7% of the Gross National Product (GNP) (UNDP 1992:8).

The migration of males results in a population sex ratio that is in favour of women: thus in 1986 there were 83.6 resident men for every 100 women (*Work for Justice*, December 1991:16). The migration of able-bodied men to South Africa effectively leaves agricultural production in the hands of women, children and the superannuated. Women play a crucial role in Lesotho's agriculture as direct subsistence producers and as farm managers for absent male landholders. This paper examines Lesotho women's access to agricultural land and their role in agricultural production in a patriarchal social system which also experiences a high level of male labour migration.

Basotho Land Tenure

The geographically defined socio-political entity that came to be known as Basutoland and at independence in 1966, Lesotho, did not exist before the middle of the 19th century. Prior to the 18th century various Southern Sotho-speaking groups had settled the area that is now Transvaal and north-east Orange Free State in the Republic of South Africa. They lived under the nominal leadership of clan chiefs and practised cattle herding and arable farming. During the dislocation caused by the rise of the Zulu nation under

Shaka between 1822 and 1836, these groups suffered numerous raids by Nguni and other groups fleeing from Shaka's military campaigns. Moshoeshoe, a chief of the Bakoena clan, gathered the diverse Sotho-speaking groups, indigenous San people, fleeing Nguni and others refugees under his leadership to resist the invasions (Gay 1980:2). The diverse groups that were consolidated under Moshoeshoe formed the nucleus of the Basotho nation. Moshoeshoe eventually came to be recognised as the paramount chief of the nascent nation.

Discontent with the British government's liberal policy over the treatment of Africans in the British ruled Cape Colony led to an exodus of Dutch settlers in search of land where they could settle and farm without interference. This large scale migration which came to be known as the "Great Trek" began in 1836. Some of these settlers came to occupy land which the Basotho regarded as rightfully theirs. There were also some English settlers who, in their search for better farmland or pasture for their animals, found themselves on land to which the Basotho laid claim. Initially Moshoeshoe accepted them as his guests, and allowed them to graze their animals and farm the land. But when the settlers began to claim ownership of the land by right of occupation, a series of wars ensued between the Basotho on one hand, and the Dutch and English settlers on the other. The first such military confrontation occurred in 1840. Attempts were made after each confrontation to define territory which each of the warring groups could claim as theirs. Between 1843 and 1869 the territory of the Basotho was redefined five times (Quinlan 1983:32). The Treaty of Aliwal North in 1869, presided over by the British government, defined Lesotho in its present circumscribed form. As a result of these boundary redefinitions the Basotho lost some land to the Cape Colony, and much good agricultural land to the Dutch settlers in the Orange Free State and found themselves confined to an area of slightly over 30,000 sq km, about 75% of which is mountainous and unsuitable for crop production.

In view of the experience of losing land to foreigners and limited quantity that consequently became available for cattle grazing and crop production, it became imperative for the Basotho to ensure that the available land and its resources were used for their common benefit. Moshoeshoe established the principle that land was the property of all Basotho held in trust

by the chiefs of the nation, of whom he was the most senior (Quinlan 1983 :49; Eckert 1980:2).

Under the proclamation, pastureland was a communal resource to which all Basotho with livestock had equal access. Arable land, however, was restricted to the use of individuals who had the right to use but could not claim ownership. It could not be alienated by way of sale or testament.

The powers to allocate land rights were delegated to the hierarchy of chiefs and village headmen. Equity was to be the guiding principle in the allocation of land rights: a household received as much land as it needed for its sustenance. Chiefs were empowered to take away land from a household which in their opinion had more than it needed. It was then reallocated. This system of distribution of land rights was intended to prevent accumulation of land by individual households. It is known, however, that chiefs and members of chiefly families had more land than the commoners. (Ashton 1959:207). This situation continues today. The chiefs are normatively expected to use their material advantages for the benefit of their subjects, especially those in need. In reality, however, the accumulation of land may be used purely for personal advantage.

In the first instance only married Basotho men were entitled to land. As soon as he got married a Mosotho man was entitled to a residential site on which to build a house, and arable land to grow food crops. He ultimately expected to receive three fields on which to grow the principal food crops of maize, sorghum and wheat. As the three food crops needed different soil conditions for their growth, fields tended to be spread over a wide area and holdings did not form contiguous units. Receiving land from a chief entailed pledging loyalty to that chief; receiving land from a chief of another village, therefore, implied repudiating allegiance to the first chief. (Ashton 1959: 147).

The limitations of arable land to married Basotho men may have originated from the fact that land was allocated for the sustenance of family groups and men were assumed to be heads of such groups. Women acquired land rights indirectly through their husbands. In the event of a divorce or separation, a woman lost her rights to her husbands fields and was expected to reincorporate herself in her parents' production unit. Sometimes unmarried, divorced or separated women could be loaned pieces of land for food

production by their brothers or fathers (Gay 1980:23). These arrangements were intended to be temporary measures, usually until such a time that the woman got married or remarried. An elderly, unmarried woman, may be granted a small field in her own right at the discretion of a chief or village headman to enable her to produce her own food (Ashton 1959:149). A widow retained lifetime rights to her deceased husband's fields, provided she continued to reside in his village and did not remarry. Traditionally, one field was reallocated on the death of her husband to someone, usually a relative of the deceased who did not have land of his own. When she died the remaining fields reverted to the chief or village headman to be reallocated, with her married sons receiving preference if they had not already been given their own fields (Gay 1980:23).

Under the impact of a rapidly growing population, over grazing, severe soil erosion and expanding residential areas, the quantity of arable land has been steadily decreasing. In 1986 the average holding size per household was estimated at 1.4 hectares with an estimated 20% of rural households being landless (Kingdom of Lesotho 1992:19). More recent estimates put the average holding size at less than 1 hectare, with 27% of rural households landless (UNDP 1992:12). The implication of the shrinking quantity of arable land is the newly formed households cannot expect to receive the customary three fields and often have to wait a long time before they can get even one field. Informal leasing of arable land has become common and a clandestine land market has developed in spite of customary prohibitions against it (Mosaase 1987: 64). This has allowed some women with cash and other resources to gain access to arable land independent of men. These changes demonstrate that land tenure is dynamic and respond to social, economic, demographic as well as ecological factors.

Agricultural Production

The Basotho are traditionally pastoralists and subsistence farmers with sorghum as the main crop. However, under the influence of the French missionaries, who began arriving in the country in 1833, they began to grow other crops such as maize and wheat. Wheat was primarily grown for trade with neighbouring European settlements.

There was a clear gender-based division of labour. Men were primarily concerned with cattle herding and all the tasks related to cattle, while women produced food crops.

Demand for Basotho grain rose sharply with the discovery of diamonds in the Orange Free State in 1867 and the opening of gold mines in the Transvaal in 1886, events which resulted in heavy population concentrations and development of towns. In response to this Basotho farmers brought more land under cultivation extending even into the valleys (German 1967:429). This increased the demand for labour which was not always available to households. The missionaries began to encourage the farmers to adopt the oxdrawn ploughs. Their efforts were successful, and by the 1870s the oxdrawn plough had mostly replaced the handhoe for cultivation (see eg Kimble 1978:94).

The adoption of the plough resulted in the development of a new division of labour whereby men assumed responsibility for ploughing and planting, on top of cattle herding, while women carried out the hand labour operations such as weeding and harvesting. The involvement of men in crop production was intermittent, rarely going beyond ploughing and planting. (Robertson 1987:151; Gay 1980:207). To accomplish their agricultural tasks women often organised themselves into work parties known as *matsema* (sing. *letsema*) and took turns to work in one another's fields (Ashton 1959:131).

Food grain exports by Basotho farmers reached a peak in the years 1910 - 1920 (Swallow and Boris 1988:179). This surplus was, however, achieved by bringing more land under cultivation rather than by the use of fertility - enhancing technologies. Extensive cultivation was possible because the population was still small and there was as yet no pressure on arable land. The chiefs acquiesced to the entrepreneurial activities of their followers. They could have limited the size of their followers' arable plots in accordance with established practice, but the likely response would have been desertion to more lenient chiefs. Moreover, the chiefs themselves needed to trade with the Europeans to acquire firearms and horses.

They could only do this if they produced surplus grain (Quinlan 1983:43). Through this trade in grain the Basotho were able to attain a measure of prosperity not enjoyed by neighbouring African groups. After 1920 it began to decline, and by 1930 Lesotho had become a net importer of

food grain. The decline in grain production is attributed to a number of interacting factors:

- (a) the introduction of protectionist measures against Basotho grain in the Orange Free State and the Transvaal, and the importation of cheap Australian and American grain to replace it, effectively removed a major incentive for surplus production;
- (b) as population increased it was no longer possible to fallow land: the resulting over-cultivation of land led to decreased fertility and poor yields over time;
- (c) as the supply of rich agricultural land declined, marginal land was brought under cultivation resulting in low output;
- (d) fertility-enhancing technologies were not used to compensate for the loss of natural soil fertility; and
- (e) recurrent drought and often erratic rainfall reduced agricultural output and made crop production a risky activity (Swallow and Boris 1988 : 179; Ferguson 1990 : 114).

As a result of the political, economic and ecological pressures described above the capacity of agricultural production to generate cash income became greatly reduced. This accelerated the outflow of labour to South Africa which had begun with the discovery of diamonds and gold. The outflow of labour to South Africa signifying the incorporation of the Basotho into the capitalist politico-economic system, and their dependence on it, which has continued to the present day. Lesotho effectively serves as a reservoir of cheap labour for South African industries, especially the mines.

Labour Migration and Agricultural Production

Initially both male and female Basotho could migrate to South Africa in search

f of work. While the men worked principally in the mines and farms, women tended to find employment as domestic workers in white homes, and as self-employed brewers of traditional African beer which found a ready market among the African miners and other industrial workers in the townships. However, in 1963 the South African government passed the Aliens' Control Act which made it an offence for foreign Africans to enter South Africa without a travel document. This law was reinforced by the Black Law Amendment Act which made it difficult for foreign Africans to enter South Africa for work except those recruited to work in the mines and farms. After 1963 the Basotho women were therefore restricted to the domestic economy while the men continued to work in South Africa. It is possible that some women continued to enter and find work in South Africa illegally.

Because of the sex-selective migration of labour there are significantly more women than men in Lesotho's domestic economy. For the majority of women and resident men subsistence agriculture is the dominant occupation. In spite of the high risks involved in crop production due to erratic rainfall, drought, hail and frost it remains a central activity in rural areas. Crop production is seen as essential to meet the needs of households with or without adequate access to cash incomes, as a cushion against food insecurity in case of inadequate or erratic migrant worker remittances, and as a means of establishing and retaining field rights and a place in the local economy.

At least 40% of holdings are managed by women in the absence of their husbands, either seeking employment, or already working in the mines (Kingdom of Lesotho 1991:4). Since fields must be cultivated to be kept the wives must ensure that they are regularly ploughed, planted and cultivated (Gay 1980:184). Ideally the migrant worker sends home money for the purpose. The money is needed principally for the hiring of ploughing oxen, equipment and purchase of seed. Agricultural tasks that are more easily or efficiently accomplished with massed labour such as land clearing, planting, weeding and harvesting are usually done by women organising themselves into *matsema*.

Where a family has its own ploughing oxen and equipment the "male" task of ploughing which would have been done by the migrant worker husband is assumed by the older male children. However, although it is

regarded as unfeminine in traditional society, the sight of a woman herding cattle or ploughing is no longer strange (World Bank 1980:9). The absence of males is apparently creating conditions favouring female entry into roles traditionally regarded as male preserves.

The available evidence indicates that the arrival of migrant remittances is neither certain nor always adequate to meet the many needs of a household (Gay 1980 :10; World Bank 1980:4). In order to have her husband's fields ploughed a woman without adequate cash may be compelled to enter into a sharecropping arrangement with someone who either owns ploughing oxen to plough for her, or someone who can pay for the hire of ploughing oxen on her behalf, in return for a share of the harvest. This sharecropping arrangement is known as *seahlolo*. The parties to a *seahlolo* agree in advance what crop will be grown, what resources they will contribute, and what proportion of the harvest each of the parties will receive. The practice of share-cropping allows individuals with financial and other resources to gain access to the products of other people's land while simultaneously allowing poorer households to keep their land under cultivation. As much as 25% of total cultivation in the country is estimated to be under some form of sharecropping arrangement (see Wilken 1979:27).

The archetypal lessor in share contracts is the poor widow without sons in wage employment, while the lessee is a younger male household, who may be an affine or not, in need of additional land. However, some women without their own land have also been able to gain access to other people's arable land indirectly through the system of sharecropping. A common way women have been able to sharecrop is by hiring ploughing oxen, which are considered the critical factor in land preparation. The cash has tended to come from wage employment or off-farm income generating activities such as beer brewing. Sharecropping, though, is rarely a permanent arrangement. The need to sharecrop varies from year to year and depends largely upon the economic circumstances of the landholder. A landholder who has access to a reasonable cash income will be able to pay for the appropriate factors of production and will be less likely to engage in sharecropping than someone who does not have such access. The fact that the essential consideration in sharecropping is whether one is able to provide one or more factors of production allows women, regardless of marital status, to gain indirect access to arable land and

n its products.

Although agriculture remains a central activity in Lesotho's rural areas in spite of a high level of labour migration, output is usually low due to erratic rainfall, small holdings, poor management practices and low uptake of agricultural inputs and as result most food has to be bought. This situation has engendered the dependency of rural household on migrant remittances and other off-farm incomes for food security. In 1990, for example, an estimated 47% of rural households were directly dependent on mine labour remittances for their basic needs.

Farm Decision-making

The agricultural holding is regarded as an extension of the domestic domain where women under customary law are jural minors. The husband as head of household makes the decisions as to the timing of operations, deployment of labour, expenditure on inputs, and adoption of new farm practices. A married woman's role in agriculture is essentially that of implementing decisions made by her husband. This is not to say, that the woman is not consulted or that they do not initiate ideas. What it does mean is that the final decision as to what gets done on the land is made by the husband.

Absent husbands are generally reluctant to surrender their traditional roles as heads of households and want to continue as managers of farm operations, making decisions and sending money to their wives who must make the actual arrangements in light of weather conditions, availability of labour and equipment without violating the husbands' instructions (Gay 1980: 185; World Bank 1980: 4; Kingdom of Lesotho 1991: 4). While a wife may make a routine farm decision, as for example, the timing of planting, innovative decisions have to be communicated to the husband and his approval sought, or may be discussed with older members of the family such as a father-in-law and the husband's elder brother to forestall criticism. The fear of a veto or criticism may be a cause of poor response to new practices and technologies by women managing holdings on behalf of their absent husbands. (See e.g. Gay 1980: 160).

Lethal aspects of mine work leave large numbers of Basotho women widowed and without a male head of household (Robertson 1987: 162);

chaba Consultants 1991: 13); this is in addition to mortality due to disease and non-mine related accidents. Widowhood seems to confer adult status on a Mosotho woman. She retains lifetime rights to her husband's fields subject to any modification that may be made on the basis of whether or not she has dependent children, and assumes full control of the affairs of her household. In the management of the household she is entitled to assistance and counsel from her affines but the ultimate decisions are hers. As head of household, therefore, a widow does not operate under the same constraints as a married woman. She is free to take innovative decisions on the land. It may be expected, then, that all factors remaining constant, widows managing their own holdings would be more responsive to agricultural innovations than migrant workers' wives, or women with resident husbands. Similarly, it might be expected that where unmarried or divorced women have access to land, provided that such access was more or less permanent, they would tend to be more responsive to agricultural innovative ideas than married women.

There is evidence that some widows have been able to use their increased independence to develop successful farm enterprises (see Robertson 1987: 162). These enterprising women have tended to use sharecropping arrangements to have their fields cultivated. Sorghum, one of the major crops grown, is used to brew beer for sale. The proceeds of beer sale are invested in cattle, or ploughing oxen and equipment which may be ploughed back into agriculture. These successful widows have tended to have larger than average holdings, are relatively young and have some formal education (cf Robertson 1987: 162).

The Land Act of 1979

The Land Act of 1979 which came into effect on 16 June 1980 was intended principally to enhance security of tenure of land-holders, in the belief that security of tenure is a precondition for long term investment in land improvement and increased agricultural production. To achieve this the Act introduced three important measures:

- (a) the agricultural lease as a tenure option;

- (b) the principle of primogeniture in the transmission of land rights;
- (c) allocation of land by a land allocation committee rather than by a chief or village headman.

The Act allows heads of households to convert their land rights received under customary law into a lease on application to the Commissioner of Lands. The lease allows the holder exclusive use of a specified piece of land for a period of not less than 10 years. The lease may be sublet, made the subject of a will, and can be used as collateral for a bank loan. The knowledge that the lease cannot be appropriated by any authority, provided the conditions are adhered to, till the specified period has expired, would allow the leaseholder to make proper investment plans, which would ultimately lead to increased productivity.

The principle of primogeniture was meant to ensure that land was not reallocated to outsiders and remained in the family even if the original allottee died. The first male issue of the family would inherit the deceased's fields and where there is no male issue, the agnatic kinsmen of the deceased would appoint an heir. It was believed that the knowledge that land would not be reallocated would encourage families to adopt a long term view of farming and make them more willing to invest in the land. It is, however, useful to point out here that even before the Act came into effect fathers had already begun making premortem allocations to their sons, which chiefs later formalised (Robertson 1987: 164; UNDP/AO 1970: 11). As the area of arable land decreased it became clear that their own sons might not be able to receive the customary fields from chiefs, or would have to wait a long time. Since sons in off-farm employment often provided the resources that made farming operations possible, it appeared reasonable to some fathers to provide for their sons during their life time. The Act, therefore, formalises what was already common place in the rural areas. However, while allowing the eldest son, or an appointed heir to inherit the deceased's fields, the Act still protects a widow's lifetime rights to her husband's fields. This means that the heir has to share the land with the widow as long as she lives. It is possible, however, that an agreement might be reached whereby the widow would give up her

share of the holding in return for assured maintenance and support.

The provision that land should be allocated by a land allocation committee on which a chief sits as an ex-officio member was meant to ensure that land rights were allocated fairly to eligible members of a community, and that any revocations were done in accordance with established procedure. There was concern in some government circles that chiefs sometimes act capriciously when they acted alone. The real reason, however, could be that the Basotho National Party (BNP), then in power, wanted to reduce the power of the chiefs by removing the basis of their social power.

The Act, however, leaves intact the provision from the customary Law of Lerotholi whereby women can only gain access to arable land through their husbands. This means that for a woman to gain permanent access to land, as distinct from informal temporary plot lease and share-cropping arrangements, she has to acquire a husband (*Work for Justice*, December 1991:7). But the introduction of the lease as a tenure option and the concept of land as a marketable commodity should make it possible, however, for married women to acquire leases because under both customary and Roman-Dutch law which coexist in the country married women are legal minors and are under the guardianship of their husbands; as such cannot enter into legal contracts on their own behalf (Maope 1984:38).

Conclusion

The paper has indicated that although women in Lesotho gain access to arable land through marriages, occasions do arise when women can gain access to arable land through other means. These occasions are, for example, when chiefs allocate arable plots to elderly unmarried women without alternative means of subsistence, fathers give plots to their daughters, or brothers to the sisters. Father-daughter and brother-sister allocations are, however, understood to be temporary arrangements pending the woman's marriage or remarriage. Ultimately women's access to arable land remains through the male as husband, father or brother.

The introduction of a market for land rights under the Land Act of 1979 would make it possible for women to acquire arable land in their own right. But the implementation of that legislation has met with so much

opposition by both the chiefs and commoner Basotho that it has been amended so many times. The amended legislation has not been published at the time of writing. In the context of increased retrenchment of mine labour in South Africa, limited domestic employment opportunities and the absence of an institutionalised system of social security, most landholders would tend to hold onto their land as a source of social security. This would have the effect of limiting the number of leases available for sale, even assuming that people were able to convert their customary land rights into leases. As land become scarce it is increasingly difficult for existing holdings to be subdivided into viable plots.

In a patriarchal social system, priority in access to arable land would tend to go to married men as head of households. Unmarried, separated and divorced women would have to find alternative means to subsist.

A woman's role as an agricultural entrepreneur may be constrained by her marital status which makes her a jural minor and subject to the overriding authority of her husband who may not be amenable to initiatives from a woman. Increased independence may lead to increased entrepreneurship among women farmers.

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No.5

**WOMEN IN PRODUCTION: THE ECONOMIC ROLE
OF WOMEN IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY LESOTHO**

WOMEN IN PRODUCTION: THE ECONOMIC ROLE OF WOMEN IN NINETEENTH - CENTURY LESOTHO

The study of African economic history has largely ignored women. In his pivotal work, *An Economic History of West Africa* (1973), A.G. Hopkins devoted a single paragraph to women, whom he briefly discussed in the context of the gender division of labor.¹ In a more recent survey, *African Economic History* (1987), Ralph Austen mentions women only seven times, even though much more material on women has become available in recent years.² Studies examining the economic contributions of women first tended to focus on those who had more visible roles as traders in the exchange system. Influenced by Marxists, scholars have more recently directed attention to the importance of production, but the historical study of African women in production has thus far been largely confined to the study of women and slavery.³ These analyses, however, do suggest directions that other historical studies of women in production should take. Hopkins argues that "the greatest single omission from the existing literature remains the lack

¹ A.G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973).

² Ralph A. Austen, *African Economic History* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1987). But this is partly a function of the lack of primary research available to these scholars. Hence, even Jeanne K. Henn's attempt to redress this problem in a chapter called "Women in the Rural Economy: Past, Present and Future" is impoverished in its discussion of the past by a dearth of sources on the historical role of women in African economies (in *African Women South of the Sahara*, (ed), Margaret Jean Hay and Sharon Stichter [London: Longman, 1984], 1 - 18).

³ Claire C. Robertson and Martin A. Klein, (eds), *Women and Slavery in Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983). The studies in Robertson and Klein's book push the study of women in production further than have historians studying economic history outside the realm of slave systems.

of knowledge about the pre-colonial rural economy."⁴ Assuming that economic historians will shape their agenda according to this need, they will necessarily be studying women, who were the primary agricultural producers in precolonial Africa.

My primary purpose is to begin to fill the gap that Hopkins described, by providing a case study of rural production in precolonial Africa that focuses on the role of women. In this article I analyze women's contribution to the process of economic expansion in nineteenth-century Basotho Society. Women were the primary agents of accumulation and growth in the nineteenth century economy of Lesotho, so the Basotho achievement of prosperity in the nineteenth century can be explained only with reference to the role of women. Women were the motivating force behind agricultural expansion, and they produced goods and services necessary for the reproduction of the household and social system. It is now generally accepted that precolonial African economies not only were receptive to innovations but also experienced dynamic growth and change. Economic historians still are trying to identify the internal factors that generated economic change in precolonial Africa, however. My goal is to demonstrate that women were a central force generating economic change and that African economic history cannot be understood without reference to women. This in turn indicates that the study of women must be integrated into every aspect of African history. It is not only feminists who need to be concerned with women in history. Historians will never be able to explain the past without understanding the contribution of women to development and change. The labor of women at home, in agriculture, and outside the household has underpinned economic growth and change throughout the world, and economic history cannot be properly analyzed without reference to this undervalued contribution.

⁴ A.G. Hopkins, "African Economic History: The First Twenty-five Years," *Journal of African History* 30, no.1 (1989): 157 - 63. Hopkins does not specifically mention the lack of attention to women's economic roles, although he is presumably aware of the gap: in this review of Austen's book he takes Austen to task for not providing sufficient coverage and analysis of work inspired by the French Annales School, which has included a focus on production and women.

Using a historical context and looking for changes over time, feminist historians studying Africa concern themselves with many of the same questions that concern feminists in general. Broader questions about the status of women in nineteenth-century Lesotho related to their noneconomic roles in kinship, religion, and politics are beyond the scope of this article. It is important to keep broader issues in mind, however, since the study of women's economic status may help to explain the conditions and incentives for the subordination of women. For example, can subordination be explained solely by economic factors? Is the household the only locus of women's subordination, or is subordination generated from outside the household as well? How has the gender division of labor stimulated and reinforced women's subordination? When women have empowered themselves, how have they done so? Do economic activity, productive activity, and/or income-generation empower women? Do they lessen their subordination? Does the subordination of women predate capitalism, or did the subordination come about as a result of capitalism?

Theses about the locus and cause of women's subordination must be tested in all societies to see if they have universal validity. For example, domestic units in Africa did not resemble their counterparts in Europe: both men and women had more ties and obligations outside of the household and were less dependent on each other within the household. Scholars studying Western societies have identified subordination within the household as the source of women's marginalization and assume that greater autonomy from the household increased a woman's independence. But the study of women in Africa suggests that even when women have considerable social and economic independence from the household, they still are not significantly empowered. This suggests that the household is not the exclusive site of subordination and that subordination cannot be explained solely in terms of economic factors.

Nevertheless, most historians of Africa agree that the study of the household, as the locus of production and of gender relations, is central to understanding women's subordination. It is also appropriate to study the household to identify factors generating economic change. Decisions about production and consumption in nineteenth-century Lesotho were made primarily at the household level rather than at some higher level ("lineage,"

village, district, nation), and in that sense households were domestic units with relative, but not absolute, economic decision-making autonomy.⁵ In this article the term "household" denotes a house and the people who identify it as a primary place of residence, even if they only live in it for part of the year. Households, therefore, were headed by men but defined in terms of women. When a man married, he built a house for his wife and was given fields by his chief for her; a man could have several wives and head several households, but a woman was responsible for maintaining the house and fields provided for her use. When a married man died, his widow became the head of her household, although in matters beyond the household she was subject to the influence or control of male kin.

Decision making within the household involved a process of negotiation. Individual men and women within a household often had different interests and varying control over family resources.⁶ In nineteenth-century Lesotho, men controlled the allocation of most household resources. Consequently, women were especially liable to deprivation in times of scarcity, which gave them a vested interest in working to increase the total wealth of the household from which their portion was allocated.

For the most part, the incentives for women to work hard to promote the expansion of production and increase household wealth, had broad application. Certainly there were differences among Basotho women in the nineteenth century in terms of class and status, so that not all women were equally powerless and vulnerable. Social distinctions among women were based on the wealth of the household their age and marital status, the extent

⁵ For a discussion of the term "household" and other concepts dealt with below, see Jane I. Guyer, "Household and Community in African Studies," *African Studies Review* 24, nos. 2/3 (June/September 1981): 87 - 137. Labor tribute and taxation in kind intruded on the economic autonomy of households.

⁶ For discussion of these issues, see the articles in Joyce Lewinger Moeck, (ed), *Understanding Africa's Rural Households and Farming Systems* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1986), e.g. Jane I. Guyer, "Intra-Processes and Farming Systems Research: Perspectives from Anthropology," 92 -104; and Christine W. Jones, "Intra-Household Bargaining in Response to the Introduction of new Crops: A Case Study from North Cameroon," 105 - 23.

to which their bridewealth had been paid off or was still outstanding, and whether they had children. But every woman experienced changes in her social status over time, only becoming more secure socially as she grew older, married, and had children. All women were therefore vulnerable in the early part of their lives, and most eventually had children who were vulnerable and needed their mother's protection. In addition, all women had similar productive responsibilities in their households, no matter how wealthy their husbands were. Hence Basotho women actively fostered the expansion of production.

It will be impossible for scholars to derive accurate theories and generalizations about women in African history until there have been many more case studies of African women. The study of women in nineteenth-century Lesotho provides a specific context in which questions about the economic role of African women can be explored. Lesotho is the indigenous term for the southern African nation of the Basotho people who were unified under the leadership of a paramount chief or king, Moshoeshoe, beginning in 1824. The creation of the Zulu state under Shaka, combined with the disruptive effects of the European intrusion and slave-raiding on the periphery of the region, sent waves of marauding refugees across southern Africa. Small, independent Basotho chiefdoms and other refugees banded together and sought protection under Moshoeshoe, who used a strong mountain fortress to protect his people and cattle. Peace was for the most part reestablished by 1832, and through a patron-client system involving the redistribution of cattle on loan, Moshoeshoe simultaneously strengthened his economic and political power while promoting the economic regeneration of Basotho society.

The Basotho achieved significant economic expansion during the middle decades of the nineteenth century and experienced considerable prosperity as craft industries boomed along with agricultural production.⁷ Unfortunately, the very success of the Basotho caused the covetous Boers, residing on drier lands to the west, to expropriate fertile Basotho lands gradually in successive wars during the 1850s and 1860s. The Basotho requested British intervention and protection after losing more than half of

⁷ Elizabeth A. Eldredge, "An Economic History of Lesotho in the Nineteenth Century" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1986).

their arable lands, and in 1868 Lesotho became colonial Basutoland. The introduction of British colonial rule into Lesotho coincided with the beginning of the mineral revolution in South Africa, as huge deposits of diamonds and gold were discovered from the 1860s to the 1880s. Large-scale European immigration and the widespread commoditization of African agriculture followed, but the final acts of land expropriation in the last decades of the nineteenth century curtailed the brief period of relative prosperity that many Africans in the region had enjoyed during the mid-nineteenth century.

I begin this study with a brief survey of the productive activities of Basotho women in agriculture and in the household, with particular attention to labor time and to specialization, which allowed for the more efficient allocation of labor. In section two I classify women's productive activities and demonstrate the critical contribution of women in the process of accumulation and economic growth. In the third section I demonstrate that women played a deliberate role in initiating economic expansion in nineteenth-century Lesotho. The economic contribution of women, however, is not to be confused with the ability of women to achieve and wield economic power through the control of wealth. It is important to examine the degree to which women were autonomous agents in production and accumulation in order to avoid depicting women simply as victims. In other words, women were not passively exploited but actively worked to reduce their dependence and vulnerability. However, their initiatives took place in the context of relative powerlessness: women exercised independent control and decision making in certain spheres of production - in a sense exercising a limited amount of control over their lives, but in the context of severe constraints. Although an in-depth analysis of the sociopolitical position of women in Lesotho falls beyond the scope of this study, in the final section of this article I raise questions concerning the relations between women, production, and power in order to shed light on the origins of women's subordination in Africa.

Women in production

Gathering was traditionally women's work, as wild greens, fruits and vegetables were consumed mostly by women. The work generally fell to girls, young unmarried women, and old women, but men and boys who were

off herding livestock often gathered wild roots and vegetables for themselves. Wild roots and vegetables were an important dietary supplement and also helped women avert starvation during droughts and crop failures.

Women cared for pigs and poultry and occasionally took care of sheep, goats, and donkeys as well. Pigs were referred to as *likhomo tsa basali*, "the cattle of women," because women always cared for them.⁸ Women were forbidden to associate with cattle because it was believed the fertility of the cattle would be adversely affected by contact with women.

There was no private ownership of land, and land use was controlled by the chiefs. Men were allocated two or three fields to cultivate when they married, and women gained access to fields only through their husbands. Upon her husband's death, a woman could inherit the rights to use some of her husband's fields in order to support her children or grandchildren.⁹

Cultivation, *ho lema*, was the responsibility of women, who used hoes to prepare fields, but men assisted in field preparation when virgin land was first being prepared for cultivation. Everyone in the household helped with sowing by hand, but when the first sprouts appeared, the long and difficult labor of weeding fell to women. Sorghum fields had to be weeded "perfectly" two or three times between sowing and reaping and had to be thinned and pruned as well. During droughts women also carried water to the fields in clay pots.¹⁰

Bird-scaring was another time-consuming agricultural activity delegated primarily to women. Because bird-scaring was necessary both day and night, special huts were built in the fields for bird-scarers, who slept in

⁸ Interviews with eleven informants. Fieldwork was carried out in Lesotho over eighteen months in 1981 - 82 and again in June - July 1988 and May - June 1989, during which time more than sixty BaSotho women were interviewed. The perspectives of BaSotho women culled from the interviews provide a critical balance in opposition to the colonial bias of most written sources.

⁹ M. Mohapi, *Temo ea Boholo-holo Lesotho* (Agriculture in Lesotho of long ago) (Moriya: Morija Sesuto Book Depot, 1956), 22.

¹⁰ Martin, *Basutoland: Its Legends and Customs* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 32.

the fields. This work was critical: an entire field could be devastated by birds in only a few hours.¹¹ During the month of March the task became so demanding that men also slept in the fields and helped with the work.¹²

Harvesting was arduous work for women. It generally took the women and children of a family one to two months to harvest the sorghum and maize fields, depending on how successful the crops had been. Little has changed since John Widdicombe observed this tedious process one hundred years ago.¹³

During the two months of the mid-winter harvest the women work very hard. A woman will leave her home a few minutes after dawn, carrying her infant on her back, and a large *Seruto* - a basin-shaped basket - on her head. She will trudge along bravely and patiently until she reaches her corn patch, at perhaps four or five or even seven or eight miles distance. In that corn patch she will work with scarcely any interval of rest until the long slanting rays of the declining sun warn her to return home. Then she piles her basket to

¹¹ Adolphe Mabile, May 24, 1860, *Journal des Missions Évangéliques* (1860), 283; Adolphe Mabile, 1863, in Betsy Celérier, ed., "Quelques Traits de la Vie Missionnaire: Extrait de la Correspondance Particulière de M. et Mad. Mabile," ms. copy, Société des Missions Évangéliques (PEMS) Archives, Morija, 58; Joseph Gerard, March 15, 1866, *Missions* 5, no.17 (March 1866): 23 - 24, cited in *Records from Natal, Lesotho, Orange Free State and Mozambique concerning the History of the Catholic Church in Southern Africa*, trans. Leo Sormany, O.M.I. (Roma, Lesotho, n.d.), 2:13.

¹² Eugene Casalis, *Les Bassoutos ou Vingt-Trois Années d'Études et d'Observation au Sud de l'Afrique* (1859; reprint, Paris: Société des Missions Évangéliques, 1933), 21; Mohapi, 34 - 41; Justinus Sechefo, "The Twelve Lunar Months among the Basotho," *Anthropos* 5, pt. 1 (1910): 71 - 81, reprinted as a pamphlet with the same title (Mazenod: Catholic Centre, n.d.), 16.

¹³ Interviews with Molikeng Motseki, March 8, 1982; Francina Palatse, March 26, 1982; 'Mamotoai Lestosa, March 26, 1982; Mamolikeng Motoai, March 26, 1982; 'Mabath Serobanyane, March 30, 1982; Nkane Azariel Kaka, March 3, 1982.

the brim with maize cobs or bunches of millet.¹⁴

Traditionally, threshing had been women's work, but over time it became more common for young men to perform this task.¹⁵ Work parties were sometimes held to thresh sorghum if the crop was large and the work too much for a family to do alone.¹⁶ Men would bring big sticks, while women brewed beer and prepared food for them. Women took over the work of cleaning the chaff from the grains and winnowing. Each woman who had helped was given a little basket of grain.¹⁷ This shift in the usual gender division of labor was not as radical as it may seem for several reasons. It was customary for boys and young unmarried men who had neither full adult status nor fields of their own to help their mothers occasionally in the fields. Furthermore, even married men performed agricultural tasks that were usually allocated to women when they provided tributary labor in their chiefs' fields, so to perform what was usually women's work was acceptable in the context of a work party.

The introduction of the ox-drawn plow in the 1850s changed labor time for both men and women. There were 2,749 plows in Lesotho in 1875

¹⁴ John Widdicombe, *Fourteen Years in Basutoland: A Sketch of African Mission Life* (London: Church Printing Co., 1891), 48.

¹⁵ E. Segoete, *Raphepheng: Bophelo ba Basotho ba Khale* (Raphepheng: Life of the BaSotho of long ago) 1915; reprint, Morija: Morija Sesuto Book Depot, 1981), 7; Mohapi, 41.

¹⁶ Interviews with Nkane Azariel Kaka, March 3, 1982; Joel Pharoe Moena, March 8, 1982; Molikeng Motseki, March 8, 1982; 'Mamotoai Letsosa, March 26, 1982; 'Mamolikeng Motoai, March 26, 1982; 'Mabatho Serobanyane, March 30, 1982; Kichinane Ratoronko, April 15, 1982; 'Malipere Tjamela, April 21, 1982; Mathotoane Mpobole, May 31, 1982; Mataelo Ramotoka, July 12, 1982.

¹⁷ Interviews with Nkane Azariel Kaka, March 3, 1982; Mamotoai Letsosa, March 26, 1982; Joel Pharoe Moena, March 8, 1982; and Malipere Tjamela, April 21, 1982; Segoete 8, Mohapi, 41, 48, 50; Martin, 40; John Gay, "Field Notes" (typescript, Jul 9 - 17, 1976); personal observation, fieldwork, 1981 - 82.

and 10, 434 in 1891, distributed over every district.¹⁸ By 1891, with a ratio of approximately one plow to twenty people, plows were widely accessible. The use of ox-drawn plows involved men more heavily in the stages of field preparation, as women were not allowed to handle the oxen. Plowing with oxen, men brought much larger fields under cultivation. The women still prepared the smaller family fields by hand, so their labor time in field preparation remained the same.

The overall agricultural labor time of women increased dramatically, however, because women had primary responsibility for the rest of the work in all of the fields. Since the number and sizes of fields under cultivation grew significantly after the introduction of the plow, the work of women in hoeing weeds, bird-scaring, and harvesting using traditional methods and technology increased accordingly. In addition, the annual agricultural labor time for women was no longer evenly distributed over time. Instead, women experienced much higher labor peaks during the seasons for weeding, bird-scaring, harvesting, and threshing.

As a rule, innovations that would have decreased the labor time of women were not readily adopted. Some Basotho either made or bought harrows to assist with weeding, but they were relatively rare. Because the labor of weeding was women's work, men had no incentive to adopt this technological innovation. Only men could use harrows because they were pulled by oxen, and women were prohibited from handling cattle. The labor time of men was therefore increased with the use of this tool, which was a disincentive for its adoption. In 1875 there were only 238 harrows in the country compared with 2,749 plows.¹⁹ Technological advances were adopted more readily when they benefited men than when they benefited women.

¹⁸ *Leselinyana la Lesotho* (Little light of Lesotho) June 1875 and November 1, 1891. This weekly newspaper in Lesotho is not to be confused with an English-language newspaper of the same (translated) name, which was published separately.

¹⁹ *Blue-Book on Native Affairs* (Cape of Good Hope, 1876), G.27-'76, 19; interviews with Mantle Mishaka, December 16, 1981; Sekaute Letle, January 13, 1982; Lehlohonolo Kele, January, 30, 1982; Joel Pharoe Moena, March 8, 1982; Kopano Jeremiah Telo, March 8, 1982; Thabo Fako, April 14, 1982; Matsekoa Motleleng, April 22, 1982.

Even when harrows were used, it was necessary for women to rid the field of the remaining weeds by hand.

Donkeys were apparently introduced at the beginning of the twentieth century, but they remained rare until recently.²⁰ The slowness with which donkeys were adopted may have been due to the fact that they were used primarily for women's work, such as collecting firewood, hauling water, and transporting crops from the fields on a piecemeal basis. The use of donkeys also made it possible for women to transport grain to mills for grinding or to stores for selling, a task that had previously fallen to men using pack oxen.

In addition to producing food, women made most of the small household items that were necessary in everyday life. Young girls were taught how to make personal items of clothing, as well as pots and utensils for cooking and for fetching water. These goods were produced primarily for household use, but the skill required and the lengthy labor time involved in some craft promoted low levels of specialization and trade in these goods among women.²¹ Like men, women realized efficiencies in production by specializing in goods that were not easy to make. The sale of these goods brought extra income into the household and, in turn, allowed women to purchase goods from other women if they did not have the time or skills to make them themselves.

Women gathered grasses and made small baskets, floor mats, covers for the doorways of huts, and cooking utensils. Some women specialized in making skirts using fibres peeled from the stems of wild marigold, which was gathered in February and March when the plants were still green. Women also dug clay, *letsopa*, from deposits found along river banks or in ditches and moulded pots for the household. Making pottery was time-consuming and thus became the specialized work of those with exceptional skills in the craft. Women manufactured soap and ointments from milk and animal fats and from red ochre and antimony, which they mined from ground deposits. In the

²⁰ Interviews with twenty-four informants, December 1981 - July 1982.

²¹ Elizabeth A. Eldredge, "Local Industries and Craft Specialization in Nineteenth-Century Lesotho" (paper presented at the African Studies Association meeting, Madison, Wis., October 30 - November 2, 1986).

nineteenth century they began making soap in imitation of the Europeans, using animal fat cooked with soda that was bought from the shops.²² Some women specialized in digging mineral salts and travelled as itinerant traders to sell the salt in areas that lacked salt deposits.²³

As for home building, the gender division of labor changed over time with the transition from reed and grass houses to stone houses. Women cut grass and reeds for thatching and built the reed and grass enclosure around the courtyard of the home.²⁴ Women also built houses out of poles that they placed upright close together and then plastered inside and outside with a mixture of dung and mud. Women replastered the walls intermittently, at least several times a year. Later in the nineteenth century some Basotho began to build with cut stone, and building increasingly became men's work.

Women were responsible for processing food for consumption and for all of the activities related to that task. Grinding grain on millstones by hand was a long, tedious job that had to be done twice a day to provide enough flour for the morning and evening meals. Meat was rarely eaten except at feasts and celebrations, so the porridge, breads, pap, and beers that women cooked and brewed formed the basis of the daily diet, along with vegetables and milk. A traveler in the 1830s observed that a woman's main occupation during the day was cooking and grinding corn.²⁵ As a missionary observed:

²² Interviews with Malefetsane Motiea, June 8, 1982; Mampeo Ranteme, March 26, 1982; Matsitso Mosoang, April 26, 1982; Mohau Nkuebe, June 1, 1982; S.S. Tlali, *Mehla ea Boholo-holo* (Olden times) Morija; Morija Sesuto Book Depot, 1951), 8; Sechefo (n. 12 above), 18.

²³ Interview with Malefetsane Motiea, June 8, 1982.

²⁴ N. Moshabesha and H.E. Jankie, "Mosotho," revised ms., PEMS Archives; Morija. 117; Segoete (n. 15 above), 7.

²⁵ *The Diary of Dr. Andrew Smith, Director of the Expedition for Exploring Central Africa, 1834 - 1836*, (ed), Percival R. Kirby (Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 1939), 114.

Each morning one sees [the women] rising before dawn in order to go fetch the water necessary for the day's consumption. This done, they must grind the grain by a very arduous method.... They sit on their heels in front of a flat rock with a surface two feet long by one foot wide. This mill is slightly tilted, with the lower end in contact with a wide basket. The worker takes in her hands a hard oval stone with which, using the whole weight of her body, she crushes the grain which is placed in small quantities on the immobile grindstone. One hour of work provides enough meal for the morning consumption. Then it must still be cooked.... The family has hardly sat down to eat when the mother takes her hoe to go work in the fields. She returns from there, her head weighed down with an enormous faggot of wood, a little before sunset, so she will have the time to fetch water, grind grain, and cook as she did in the morning.²⁶

Twice a day it was necessary to fetch water for cooking and washing, and collecting fuel for the cooking fire was just as difficult. In the 1840s and 1850s it was still possible to find wood for fuel along the Caledon River, but as early as 1845 fires were built with dry animal dung.²⁷ By 1891 dry dung, *lisu*, was "the ordinary fuel of the country."²⁸ A military report in 1905 emphasized the problem and its effect on women: "The depredations of an ever-increasing population have caused the supply of wood to recede further and further away from the habitations. The womenfolk, on whom rests the responsibility of keeping the household in fuel, are often obliged to travel five or six miles every day to the nearest watered kloof, returning the same

²⁶ Casalis (n.12 above), 183 - 84. Translation mine.

²⁷ Casalis, June 20, 1846 PEMS Archives, Paris, AL 355, 1846 - 47, 115; Casalis, July 8, 1853, PEMS Archives, Paris, AL 1853 - 4, 179.

²⁸ Widdicombe (n. 14 above), 50. See also Martin (n. 10 above), 38.

distance heavily laden with faggots weighing some 120 lbs."²⁹

As in contemporary Lesotho, in the last century dried cattle dung, *lisu*, was dug from the floors of cattle kraals during the winter when the herds were kept at home. For most of the year only dung collected from fields, *khapane*, and woody shrubs, *patsi*, were available for cooking.

Few innovations were adopted to lessen the burden of women's work. Two European mills were built in the nineteenth century, but because the costs of having grain ground at these mills was high and they were inaccessible to most people, few Basotho used them until well into the twentieth century.³⁰

Women and accumulation

Scholars have explored the issue of accumulation in Africa in order to distinguish the incentives for accumulation there (i.e., control over resources) from incentives in a capitalist system (i.e., increasing productivity). But the role of women in accumulation has been ignored, because the importance of their productive role has remained largely unrecognized. The question of women's contribution to the economy that I examine here and in the next section addresses issues in economic development, rather than issues of women's power. This section and the following section are devoted to a consideration of how and why economic change was generated by women in Lesotho.

Women worked hard throughout the year. Much of their daily work was demanding and tedious. Figure 1 below presents the seasonal distribution of labor for women and demonstrates the interrelationship of the labor

²⁹ *Military Report and General Information concerning Southern Basutoland*, prepared for the General Staff, War Office (London, 1905), 25.

³⁰ Interviews with Mamoerabe Rakhele, December 14, 1981; Masekotoano Lelakane, December 14, 1981; Lefaufau Maama, December 16, 1981; Moeketsi Moseeka, February 6, 1982; Mampeo Ranteme, March 26, 1982; Makoloti Koloti, March 30, 1982; 'Mabatho Serobanyane, March 30, 1982; Rosalia Tlali, April 15, 1982; Matsitso Mosoang, April 26, 1982.

demands of agriculture and household production. Gathering activities were greatest during the spring, when stored grain supplies were used up and new crops were not yet ripe. The time of peak labor demand for women was in the winter months of May through July. This was the best time for building and thatching because it was the season for harvesting reeds and roofing grasses. This was also the time of year when animals were slaughtered and ointments from animal fats were prepared. Unfortunately, these activities coincided with the time of peak labor demand in agriculture for women.

Obviously, the workload of women was heavy. In order to demonstrate that women's work contributed to production (and did not merely facilitate consumption), it is useful to classify the activities of women in terms of the nature of their economic contribution.

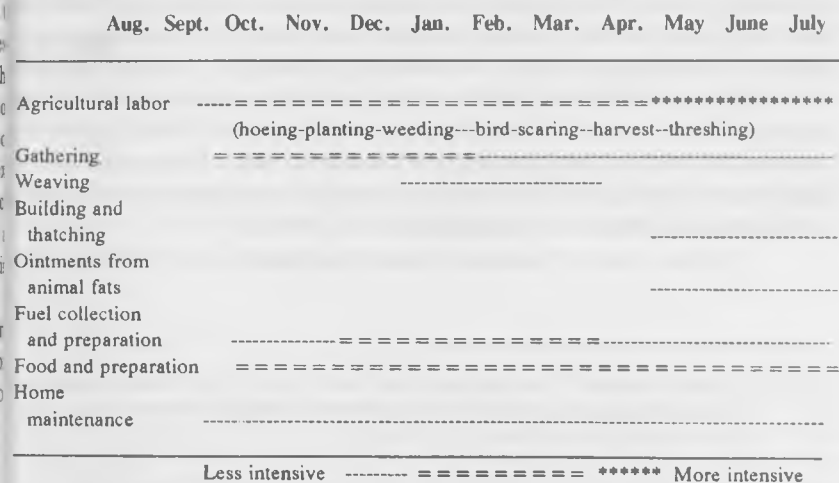


FIG. 1 Seasonal distribution of labor for women

Women's work can be grossly undervalued because it tends to be linked with consumption rather than production for exchange, rendering the

work "invisible" in modern labor statistics.³¹

The distinction between production for consumption and production for exchange is largely irrelevant in the case of nineteenth-century Lesotho, because the organization of labor, including the sexual division of labor, was not significantly affected by whether production was for home consumption or for an external market. Surplus grain was sold both locally and to external markets, but unlike people in other parts of Africa, the Basotho did not adopt the production of new cash crops that primarily involved men's labor.³² Foods and goods that were exchanged locally and sold to traders for export were surpluses from agriculture or craft production. Men did become more involved in agricultural production in response to market opportunities, but they did not displace women as the primary agricultural producers.

The role of women in production was critical to accumulation and economic growth. The reproduction and maintenance of the labor force has been recognized as one of women's indirect contributions for the accumulation process in the capitalist sector of developing economies. Clearly women's role in the reproduction of the household, through production, was just as important to the economy of nineteenth-century Lesotho. When goods for consumption were produced within the household, scarce resources could be either saved or redirected to the purchase of goods for production, thus aiding in the economic process of accumulation and growth.

In their study of women in rural Bangladesh, B.J. Wallace, R.M.

³¹ Lourdes Beneria, "Conceptualizing the Labor Force: The Underestimation of Women's Economic Activities," in *African Women in the Development Process*, (ed), Nici Nelson (London: Cass, 1981), 10 - 28.

³² When wheat was first introduced it was grown primarily for export, but not on a large scale. The expansion of wheat production occurred late in the century when the Basotho moved into the mountains. There wheat fared better than the traditional crops of sorghum and maize. At this point wheat was adopted into the Basotho diet and was produced for both consumption and exchange. Men did participate in the harvesting of wheat more often than with other crops, but this was because it was necessary to harvest wheat quickly rather than piecemeal, and the gender division of labor in agriculture did not substantively change in the production of wheat (Eldredge, "An Economic History in the Nineteenth Century" [n.7 above], 109 - 11).

Ahsan, S.H. Hussain, and E. Ahsan suggest that women make both direct and indirect economic contributions to the household.³³ They use the following criteria to determine whether an activity constitutes a direct or indirect contribution to the household economy: "A direct economic contribution is made when a woman actually brings to the household either money or goods which she has received for services performed or goods produced and sold. An indirect economic contribution is made when she performs a work activity that she or her husband theoretically would have to pay (in cash or kind) another person to complete, i.e., time working at home is an indirect economic activity because it is a saved expenditure."³⁴

According to these criteria, Basotho women made many direct economic contributions to their households during the nineteenth century. Women produced many goods that were traded outside the household. Foremost among these was surplus grain: grain was traded for livestock, and men used the surplus grain that their wives produced in order to increase their herds. The labor of women in cultivation was therefore directly translated into the "capital" (i.e., livestock) holdings of the household and assisted in the process of "capital" accumulation. In addition, the surplus grain that women produced was used to buy iron tools and weapons from local smiths, contributing to the more efficient production of food through hunting and cultivation. In the nineteenth century, food was the "money" of Lesotho, or

³³ B.J. Wallace, R.M. Ahsan, S.H. Hussain, and E. Ahsan, *The Invisible Resource: Women and Work in Rural Bangladesh* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1987), 73 - 76. Other approaches, such as those employed in detailed case studies presented in Moock, (ed). (n.6 above), are more useful in understanding how (and why) a gender division of labor is negotiated, an issue that this classification of activities does not address. These alternative approaches are concerned with critical issues about the gender division of labor as it relates to household decision making and women's power, but the limitations of sources from the distant past preclude their use in a study such as this. In the discussion of the agency of economic change being addressed here, the value of this classificatory approach lies in its recognition of the value of women's work given the negotiated gender division of labor.

³⁴ Wallace *et al.*, 73.

as one informant stated, "sorghum is money."³⁵ Surplus grain was used to pay for the services of other craftsmen and specialists, including tailors, weavers, shoemakers, and healers. In the latter part of the century, grain was sold to European traders for a variety of imported goods. Women also produced surplus craft goods for sale outside the household and traded their labor for grain, which again made a direct economic contribution to the household.

Women's indirect economic contributions were also significant. Work associated with the preparation of food - gathering fuel, fetching water, grinding, and cooking - was essential to the survival and well-being of household members. Although often subsumed under the category of reproductive labor, these activities are aptly characterized as productive, because they assist indirectly in the accumulation process. Put simply, if women did not perform these tasks, someone else would have to be paid to do them.

Because the provision of food was the primary means for compensating labor recruited from outside the household, there was a gender-based difference in the organization of labor for given agricultural and household tasks. When men were faced with labor-intensive tasks such as clearing and preparing fields or preparing animal skins, they recruited laborers from outside the household (often in the context of a "work party") and compensated them with cooked food. This labor appears to be an exclusively male contribution to production, but women played a crucial role as well. It was the women who prepared and provided the food and beer to compensate the laborers, generally investing as much labor time as that of the men. A male head of household could thus exchange the women's labor for the labor of other men, effectively decreasing his own workload.

This work-party option for large and difficult tasks was not as readily available to women, however, because they could not compensate workers with cooked food without taking the time to prepare the food themselves. Indeed, they would merely be trading one kind of work (the task itself) for another preparing food. When women worked in groups to complete

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Interview with Mahlatsoane Seboche, July 13, 1982.

agricultural tasks, the "host" reciprocated by agreeing to provide her own labor to the other women who helped in her fields. In this case, women's labor time was not reduced but merely reallocated. When work parties were held for weeding, harvesting, or threshing, men did help complete work that was normally delegated to women. Even so, the women's job of preparing and cooking food and helping with the work itself might amount to several days and nights of labor at one time. This might have been preferable to completing the given tasks on a daily basis over a period of a month or more, but the woman still had to use her own labor to compensate workers who were completing agricultural tasks for her.

Over time the gender division of labor did begin to break down, somewhat to women's advantage. The most significant changes occurred with the introduction of the ox-drawn plow. Men were motivated to increase their contribution to arable production primarily by market opportunities that allowed for the commoditization of agricultural products beginning in the 1840s and 1850s. This does not diminish their contribution toward lightening the burden of women, however. To compensate the increasing workload of women after the adoption of the plow, men's labor was reallocated; that is, they began to help women. It became more common to hold work parties for weeding, harvesting, and threshing, at which both married and young unmarried men helped with the agricultural tasks that women usually performed. Some men made or bought harrows and used them to help with the weeding process, and men helped with bird-scaring during the most demanding months. All of these strategies were designed to reduce the peak labor seasons of women, while reducing the periods of underemployment for men. The Basotho had resisted the adoption of wheat since the missionaries first introduced it in the 1840s, but they began cultivating wheat more extensively beginning in the 1870s, largely because it could be grown in the colder mountain regions and even during winter months in the lowlands. The adoption of winter wheat thus reflected another attempt to allocate male labor more efficiently to increase production and reduce periods of underemployment in response to the new market for grain at the mines. And so the precedent was set for more changes in the allocation of labor at the end of the century, as male participation in the migrant labor system increased.

As land shortages combined with droughts and crop failures forced more men into migrant labor in the 1890s, the burden of production increased for those at home, particularly for women. But clearly women were already fully employed in the local economy, so it was impossible for women to increase their labor inputs in agriculture without reducing their labor time in other areas of production. The change in women's workload, then, came not in the number of hours worked but in the way the labor time was allocated among various tasks. Forced to spend more and more time on agricultural tasks, women gave up other activities such as weaving, pottery, and home building. Men similarly gave up or spent less time on some tasks, such as the preparing and sewing of skin clothing, home building, weaving, and carving. Men used their wages to purchase goods that they once had made, such as blankets, clothing, and wooden and iron tools, weapons, and utensils. They also purchased goods previously made by women, such as skirts, pots, utensils, and cosmetics. In this way women's workload in household production was reduced, allowing them to contribute more time to agricultural labor.

Other tasks were allocated increasingly to the old or the young. Old women and young girls collected dung for fuel and gathered wild vegetables. Young girls fetched water, cared for younger children, and helped with grinding, weeding, and harvesting. Boys and girls helped with bird-scaring. Young boys, who had formerly cared only for small livestock, took over care of cattle as well. Old people cultivated vegetables and tobacco in gardens near the homesteads. In these ways the local economies adjusted to losing young men's labor to migrant work.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century the labor burden of women left at home stabilized. Because there was no new land available for new generations of young men, for the first time land-holdings were subdivided among sons and their wives, and the land held by each household decreased in size. Women were able to sustain agricultural production until the constraints of smaller land-holdings and soil deterioration made it increasingly difficult to produce enough food for subsistence. The twentieth century thus saw women seek alternative forms of employment as migrant laborers to farms in the Orange Free State, as beer brewers and, when desperate, as prostitutes.

The economic initiative of women

From the early 1830s through the 1880s, Basotho agricultural production grew steadily as a result of an increase in labor inputs, the adoption of new technologies, and the intensification of land use. The case of Lesotho does not support the model proposed by Ester Boserup and others, which suggests that the labor of women in agriculture declines significantly with the intensification of production through technological advances.³⁶

On the contrary, evidence from Lesotho supports Judy C. Bryson's assertion that the adoption of new technology such as the ox-plow did not decrease African women's agricultural labor, even when it increased the labor of men.³⁷

Men made decisions about whether to adopt innovative technology, and as a rule they invested only in those technologies that benefited themselves. As Kathleen Staudt and others have pointed out, there are separate male and female interests inside and outside the household, and consequently households do not constitute "homogeneous decision-making units." As Staudt has said, "separate interests have all sorts of ramifications for agricultural production as well as for receptivity to innovation."³⁸ Staudt is concerned with demonstrating that these separate interests can deprive women of direct incentives to innovate when the benefits of innovation accrue to men rather than to women. The evidence from nineteenth-century Lesotho demonstrates that the converse is also true. Men were not receptive to innovation when the benefits accrued to women, as with the adoption of harrows to assist in the weeding process or the acquisition of donkeys to assist

³⁶ Ester Boserup, *Woman's Role in Economic Development* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1970).

³⁷ Judy C. Bryson, "Women and Agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa: Implications for Development (an Exploratory Study)," in Nelson, (ed), 29 - 46.

³⁸ Kathleen Staudt, "Rewriting Agricultural History: Women Farmers at the Center" (Paper presented at the African Studies Association meetings, New Orleans, November 23-26, 1985), 19.

in transport in women's work. The adoption of related innovations, such as the use of European mills, was resisted by men, who made the decisions regarding the capital expenditures of the household. The adoption of the harrow was further impeded because it increased men's labor at a time when men were being drawn off into migrant labor.

The evidence concerning the benefits accruing from the adoption of the plow is more ambiguous. Both men and women benefited from the expansion of arable production that the plow made possible, but both were also required to invest more labor time. Late in the century young women began to stipulate that their future husbands have plows and know how to use them.³⁹ This was significant for two reasons. First, women's need to insist that their husbands have plows suggests that men did not always perceive that the benefits of the plow were sufficient incentive for adopting it. Second, women apparently were aware that although their workload also increased with the plow's adoption, the benefit derived from producing a grain surplus was a sufficient incentive for working more hours. Did the reported ability of young women to influence the choice of their marriage partners, based on the prospective husband's possession of a plow reflect real leverage? Did it indicate a certain amount of control over their lives that normally lay in the hands of their fathers? Probably this leverage was illusory and the young women's stipulations were respected only because their desire coincided with the interests of their fathers, who arranged their marriages. It was evident to the father of a marriageable woman that a man with a plow could bring larger fields under cultivation and would be better able to generate a high income, allowing him to pay off quickly his outstanding bridewealth debt to the wife's family.

Given the subordinate position of women in Basotho society socioeconomically and politically, it seems surprising that women would initiate changes that increased their own workload. I suggest that this occurred precisely because of their marginal position in society. Women and children suffered first and foremost during times of food scarcity and were

³⁹ Widdicombe (n. 14 above), 47; *Quarterly Paper of the Orange Free State Mission (Anglican)*, vol. 75 (January 15, 1887); Adeline Melato, June 4, 1896, *Petit Messager* (newspaper published by the Société des Missions Évangéliques, Paris) (1896), 95.

left largely to fend for themselves by gathering wild plants (known as famine foods) when grain stores ran out. This gave women a compelling motive to increase the stores of grain. In nineteenth-century Lesotho, where the population had suffered severe famine in the 1820s and continued to do so in the wake of severe droughts, the threat of famine was ever present to stimulate women's efforts in cultivation.⁴⁰ Furthermore, women's efforts in cultivating a grain surplus was one of the few ways in which they could exercise some control over their own fate.

Women took other initiatives in reducing their vulnerability to hunger and want. The care of pigs fell largely to them, with the help of children, but they apparently took on the task willingly because the new animals could provide extra food. Women voluntarily helped other households with harvesting work, in order to increase the food stores of their own households. Women who specialized in crafts produced more goods than their families needed, in order to trade for other household goods or additional food.

These were voluntary activities, and they arose because women perceived the benefits they would derive from more household wealth. The extent to which women were willing to invest their labor should be viewed in the context of their marginal position in society as a whole. Excluded from ownership or control over land and cattle, women were largely dependent on their husbands and male kin for access to wealth and for protection from hunger and poverty. Thus a woman benefited when the resources of the household increased, even when she did not control those resources herself. A wealthy household was more likely to have access to food in times of scarcity, making the marginal members of the household - women and children - less at risk of being deprived or cast off.

Women, production, and power

More research is needed on the social and political status of women in nineteenth-century Lesotho before conclusion can be reached about the relationship between their economic roles and their sociopolitical position.

⁴⁰ Elizabeth A. Eldredge, "Drought, Famine and Disease in Nineteenth-Century Lesotho," *African Economic History*, no.16 (1987), 61 - 93.

Studies of women elsewhere in Africa suggest several approaches to analysing the causes and consequences of their vulnerability and powerlessness in Lesotho. In an analysis of Batswana women in the early nineteenth century, Margaret Kinsman argues that women's extreme vulnerability led them to idealize subordination and glorify servitude through the adoption of a work ethic.⁴¹ Her study illuminates some of the ways in which women were vulnerable but in contrast I argue that Basotho women did not necessarily accept their status. They instead made use of the few options available to them to reduce their vulnerability. The extent to which Basotho women controlled household resources, especially food, varied. Men generally controlled the grain that was stored in granaries, but women traded many goods and services to acquire their own supplies of food. In addition, because they were responsible for cooking and distributing food, women had some control over the household's day-to-day grain supply, and their ability to produce and control surpluses, although limited, was significant.

Kinsman's emphasis on women's vulnerability may explain the incentive to work hard, but it begs the question of why women were so vulnerable. Kinsman presents a circular argument, attributing women's vulnerability to factors such as their lack of control over resources and their lack of access to courts, and then explaining that women could not break free from their subordination because of their vulnerability. Did women lack power and status because they lacked economic resources? Or did they have limited access to resources because they lacked sociopolitical power and authority?

Although Kinsman fails to explain the sources of women's vulnerability, she accurately depicts the dilemma that women faced in southern Africa. Women were powerless because men sought to control their reproductive and productive capacities. Under traditional law, Basotho women were jural minors. They had rights of access to property, support, and the courts only through their male relations - fathers or husbands. As Judith S. Gay indicates, even today "rights over a woman's sexuality, labour

⁴¹ Margaret Kinsman, " 'Beasts of Burden': The Subordination of Southern Tswana Women, ca. 1800-1840," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 10, no. 1 (October 1983): 39-54.

and reproductive capacity continue to be vested in either the men of her own patrilineage or transferred by bridewealth to those of her husband's patrilineage."⁴²

These customary laws were the means for, rather than the cause of, Basotho women's subordination. Women were valued largely for their reproductive functions: bridewealth was paid to the woman's family so that the husband's family would receive rights to his children. But women were also valued for their productive labor, so in seeking to relate the economic role of women to their subordination, we must ask whether their productive activities have been an avenue for empowerment or a further incentive for men to subordinate them. In nineteenth-century Basotho society, social and political status derived from wealth and the ability to gain clients and loyalty through the distribution of wealth, which in turn engendered obligations. Men prevented women from having independent access to material resources, especially land and cattle, to ensure women's dependence and to prevent them from building their own networks of sociopolitical power. Only by limiting women's power could men ensure their own control over reproduction and production, from which their own wealth and power derived.

This explains in part the taboo against women's handling of cattle, which applied throughout the region. Historians and anthropologists disagree over whether this restriction on women was fundamentally the result of an ideological constraint - the belief that women's fertility adversely affected the fertility of cattle - or whether ideology merely provided justification for limiting women's access to this form of wealth. Whatever the cause, the effect was to prevent women from owning the most productive resource of the society, preventing them in turn from building the client relationships that

⁴² Judith S. Gay, "Basotho Women's Options: A Study of Marital Careers in Rural Lesotho" (Ph. D. diss., University of Cambridge, 1980), 5 - 6. For further analyses of the present status of Basotho Women, see also Martha Mueller, "Women and Men, Power and Powerlessness in Lesotho," in *Women and National Development: The Complexities of Change*, (ed). Wellesley Editorial Committee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 154 - 66; S. Poulter, *Family Law and Litigation in Basotho Society* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976); Colin Murray, *Families Divided: The Impact of Migrant Labour in Lesotho* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

formed the basis of sociopolitical power.⁴³

Writing about the Kikuyu, Carolyn M. Clark shows that women's economic role and socioeconomic position are mutually reinforcing, implying that women can seek to empower themselves by exercising economic initiative.⁴⁴ The distribution of food by male elders to reward work parties or to recruit followers was central to the sociopolitical formation of the Kikuyu, and Clark argues that women shaped the political economy by controlling the distribution of cooked food and beer. Seeking to explain why women gained any advantage from feeding work parties, Clark suggests that the increasing number of women attached to the male elder allowed them to work cooperatively in larger groups. Similarly, because of the vulnerability of women to scarcity and deprivation, I suggest that women's limited control over household resources gave them a strong interest in seeing that the wealth of the household accumulated.

The primary role of women's labor in cultivation therefore empowered Basotho women, albeit in a very limited way, because they benefited directly from, the fruits of their own labor - thereby exercising some control over their own fates. Still, with all of their rights vested in their male kin, women held a clearly subordinate social position. Those who rose to positions of wealth and prominence did so as widows who essentially were allowed to preserve the household wealth until their death, when it passed on to male kin. Daughters did not inherit wealth or status. Women who became "chiefs" were really regents, holding the position open for their sons to inherit when they reached their majority. Women's economic power was severely limited, and they were unable to parlay their limited control over agricultural production into any social or political advantage.

In Lesotho, women's subordination predated colonialism and capitalism, but the intrusion of capitalism, aided by colonialism, both

⁴³ For another perspective of these issues in the context of Southern Africa, see Jeff Guy, "Analysing Pre-Capitalist Societies in Southern Africa," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 14, no.1 (October 1987): 18 - 37.

⁴⁴ Carolyn M. Clark, "Land and Food, Women and Power, in Nineteenth Century Kikuyu," *Africa* 50, no.4 (1980): 357 - 70.

perpetuated and intensified women's subordination by creating additional incentives and opportunities for that subordination. In the domestic struggle over household resources, women made gains in the middle of the nineteenth century and were perhaps minimally empowered by their productive activities. But the colonial system, by depriving Africans in general of their productive resources, intensified the struggle over remaining resources, which heightened the struggle between rich and poor and between men and women. Because the colonial system favoured rich over poor and men over women, women were losers on two counts.

The case of Lesotho offers a clear example of this process in the context of the intrusive capitalism of South Africa: men were driven to work in capitalist industries (e.g., mines) when the resources at home became inadequate for their support, but low wages and the lack of job security or a social security system for African workers kept migrant men dependent on women, who sustained agricultural production at home. Men therefore had a clear incentive to try to strengthen their control over women, although male dependence gave women some leverage to limit that control. But with the entire African society threatened by the colonial system and its collusion with capitalism, Basotho women came to identify their interests with those of their husbands and fathers. Just as class struggles between rich and poor within Basotho society were subordinated to the national struggle, so too was the struggle of women against their own subordination overshadowed by the more pressing threat of European colonialism. For the most part women who resisted subordination at home by migrating to the cities found themselves subject to severe restrictions imposed by colonialism, capitalism, and racism, and in the end did not escape subordination at all.

This scenario was played out in rural areas throughout southern Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as the migrant labor system reached farther afield for laborers. Women throughout the region had always performed the bulk of agricultural labor, but the gender division of labor shifted both in response to adoption of new technology (ox-drawn plows) and to increasing male labor migration. Lesotho was unique mainly in that it was one of the first areas to be influenced by the introduction of the ox-drawn plow and the commoditization of agriculture, long before the introduction of colonial rule and the migrant labor system. Changes in the

gender division of labor that were fostered by the introduction of the plow and by the commoditization of agriculture occurred independently from direct colonial influence and can be attributed to the initiative of the BaSotho themselves. In addition, the advent of the plow in Lesotho occurred while open land was still plentiful, allowing much more land to be brought under cultivation and increasing the agricultural workload. In other areas of southern Africa the plow arrived later, after available land was already circumscribed, so that the plow diminished rather than increased the workload of men and women.

Clearly, women played a critical role in promoting economic growth in nineteenth-century Lesotho. It is important to see women not merely as pawns, but as actors who consciously strove to shape their own destinies. In Lesotho as elsewhere in Africa, male domination manifested itself in male control over the resources of production. Women's participation in production, therefore, took place in the context of a domestic struggle over resources. Given a social structure that left women dependent on men, the interests of women in terms of their material well-being were closely tied to those of their male kin. Male control over resources meant that women's share of household resources was limited, and the only way women could increase the resources available to them for consumption was to increase the total resources of the household. Under these circumstances, women were motivated to produce surpluses with the goal of contributing to the overall wealth of the household. Women's efforts to improve their own material position represented an important internal dynamic generating economic growth and change in nineteenth-century Lesotho.

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No.6

**MARXISM VERSUS THE PATRIARCHY:
GENDER AND HISTORICAL MATERIALISM
IN
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Introduction

The remaining socialist regimes and liberation movements of the world are under intense economic, political and psychological pressure to abandon marxism as an ideology of resistance to capitalism. In addition, in academic circles, there have been sustained theoretical critiques of both "classical" and "neo" marxism from within the left. For example, in the 1960s radical feminists advanced the concept of patriarchy as a universal condition of male dominance, whose oppressive values were held to be so deeply rooted in language, family structures and the heterosexual act itself, that they could not be defeated by either legal reform, as liberals would have it, or proletarian revolution, as marxists would have it. In the 1970s and 80s, third world women also accused both Western marxists and feminists of racism and imperialism. Post-modernism went even further to argue that any attempt to posit universal theories of oppression, human essence or revolution was inescapably totalitarian.

These critiques, combined with the fall of communist regimes, have hit sensitive nerves. Some repentant marxists are attempting to distance themselves at least semantically from the excesses committed in the name of Marx since the Bolshevik revolution. Eschewing such terminology as "class struggle" and invoking "post-marxism," they see themselves as part of the effort to "renovate" Marxist theory in order to deal with the dramatically changed circumstances and sensitivities of the 1990s (Cambridge 1990; Blackburn 1991; Harris 1992; Shaw 1991).

This paper seeks to contribute to that effort by analyzing some of the current debates around the value of classical marxism to current struggles in Lesotho and Southern Africa, focusing on the gender dimension of class analysis. First it will try to show how Marx is still relevant to the understanding of women's oppression and, second, how radical feminist and post-modern insights can contribute, if subjected to the "relentless criticism" that Marx originally called for, to improving historical research and analysis.

Ultimately, it is argued, restoring confidence in an "insistently

materialist" method, rather than semantically abandoning it, should help to generate original and practical means of advancing the struggle towards the democratic socialist ideal. To the modest extent that the intellectual exercise "can accelerate the historical process that is going on, rendering practice more homogeneous, more coherent, more efficient" it is relevant to the struggle taking place in Southern Africa today.¹

Marxism and the Woman Question

To classical marxists, the "woman question" was how to explain the relationship between the subordination of women to men and the exploitation of workers as a class. They have been heavily criticized by many feminists for failing to answer this question and for failing to support seriously women's suffrage and other rights (discussed below). Yet the fact is that historical, dialectical materialism-- that is, classical marxism--provided one of the earliest inspirations to women who were disillusioned with the unfulfilled promises of liberal society. Despite the disappointments of actually existing socialism and the oppressively bureaucratic states which claimed marxist inspiration, it remains so today. Two centuries after Mary Wollstonecraft argued for liberal reforms to sweep away the anachronistic laws and sex prejudices which oppress women, women in the liberal democracies of the West continue to earn about two thirds the average wage as men, and less than half in Japan (INSTRAW 1985, 165). They continue also to occupy a minuscule fraction of decision-making positions in government and business (2-10%) while in much of the world, the past decade has seen the increasing "feminization of poverty" as economic conditions for women worsen (Rodgers 1987). This is especially true in Africa where liberal reforms (or structural adjustment) are having a devastating impact upon the social services which have benefitted women most since independence (Elson 1987). However, the evidence shows a strong co-relation between a politicized trade union movement and women's greater economic and social equality with men (Segal 1991). In Africa, self-

¹ Gramsci 1971, 365. My own semantic trick to disavow past dogmatism (etc.) is to use the lower-case "marxism" to stand as short-hand for Marx's only "orthodoxy", his method (Georg Lukacs, quoted in Hartssock 1979, 60).

professed marxists regimes such as in Zimbabwe and Mozambique made flawed but still impressive efforts to emancipate women (Weiss 1986; Urdang 1985).

Marx did not specifically address the "woman question" but his critique of liberalism struck a strong chord among early feminists. They were drawn in particular to Marx's rejection of the liberal conception of human nature as a dichotomy of body and soul (or Reason), the latter being valued above the body's physical needs and lusts. Enlightenment idealists held that the urge towards Reason could be objectively recognized (according to universal principles) and then rewarded by society as meritorious. According to this view, the ultimate rationality is the maximization of self-interest and hence liberalism came to be the ideology of capitalism, rationalizing the exploitation of the many by the few.

Even before Marx, women like Flora Tristan had argued that Reason as such (and objectivity itself) were subjectively defined by mainly bourgeois men. This was seen to work to the detriment of women in particular who, bogged down by the mundane details of reproduction and household maintenance, tended to be less successful in appreciating or attaining the ideal of separation of body and soul. Since, by liberal logic, lack of success in that regard is definitive evidence of lack of merit, bourgeois male philosophers rather easily concluded that women deserved and even preferred by nature to be confined to the house or degrading, poor-paying jobs. In other words, in the marxist view, the pervasive dualism in Western philosophy, art and science tends overwhelmingly to devalue the behaviour and perceptions associated with femineity (and manual labour) while glorifying those of masculinity (and mental labour).²

The fact that Marx generally did accept other Enlightenment ideas about industrial progress and scientific rationality should not detract from the value of feminists of his attack upon the politically-charged dualism of Enlightenment thought. In place of an ineffable universal Reason, Marx posited a unity of consciousness and "praxis". Thus, human rationality is derived predominantly from and limited by the need to meet the material or

² Rowbotham 1972; Jaggar 1983; Harding 1986; Tong 1989

biological demands of life. Moreover, since humans cannot physically survive on their own, praxis is necessarily a social process. In short, human consciousness arises from the social effort of production which itself, in a dialectical manner, is shaped by human consciousness. As Engels put it, "the hand is not only the organ of labour, *it is also the product of that labour* (Marx and Engels 1968, 359). Culture (including gender relations), technology, and even human biology can only be understood with reference to the specific means by which each society organize itself to produce.

Contrary to the assertion that Marx reduced real people to straightforward "functions" of their economic situation, he emphasized the enormous and unpredictable diversity of class, ethnic and gender consciousness. He did, however, posit a universal spirit or "species being" which was grounded in an urge to produce. As long as one's productive labour is given freely, it is both an act of creation and of creating, rewarding the creator with a sensuous feeling of purpose and fulfilment. It is only when the products of that labour are appropriated for the benefit of someone else that the creator becomes "alienated" from him/her work and his/herself, a sense which becomes particularly acute under capitalism. As Marx put it, the shift of the majority of production from the household to the factory results in working conditions which:

mutilate the labourer into a fragment of a man, degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, destroy every remnant of charm in his work and turn it into hated toil... they distort the conditions under which he works, subject him during the labour conditions under which he works, subject him during the labour-process to a despotism the more hateful for its meanness; they transform his life-time into working time and drag his wife and child beneath the wheels of the Juggernaut of capital." (Marx 1967, 645).

That capitalism had specific and harmful ramifications for women was mentioned in passing by Marx and Engels as early as *The German Ideology* (1846) and *The Communist Manifesto* (1847). It was not until about four decades later however that Bebel and Engels elaborated the specific ways

that women became, in effect, the domestic slaves of the wage slaves, condemned to a life of isolation, drudgery and brutality.³ In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Engels rejected the notion that the subjugation of women was natural. On the contrary, he analyzed the ethnographic data available at the time to conclude that women had once been equal to men as "social adults". It was the domestication of animals and agricultural crops which created social inequality as these, following the logic of the existing sexual division of labour, came to be owned by men (for example, because women needed to stay close to their children, they could not wander far and wide tending cattle).

Once private property had been introduced and concentrated in men's hands, women's claims for a share of men's production were backed by offering domestic services in exchange. As long as women remained in charge of a significant proportion of domestic production, their economic bargaining power remained strong enough to ensure a certain dignity and status *vis-a-vis* men. As more and more production left the household domain however, their claims upon the surplus grew ever more tenuous and their status consequently declined. The Industrial Revolution hastened this process immeasurably as private property and production outside the household became paramount (Marx and Engels 1968).

Engels and subsequent marxists have shown a number of ways in which the "middle class" ideal of family and women's behaviour has been profitable, and therefore "functional" to the development of capitalism in the West. Through imperialism, the Western experience of how gender relations were structured and restructured over time had profound significance worldwide. Thus, while Engels may indeed be criticized for his ethnocentricity, his analysis of the oppression and exploitation of women was

³ Bebel's *Women Under Socialism* was actually written first (1875) but was not translated into English until 1889, five years after Engel's monograph. Although theoretically weaker than Engels, Bebel was more popular. By 1914, there were over 50 editions of his book in print (Bebel 1971; Scott, 1976).

nevertheless largely adopted by revolutionaries throughout the Third World.⁴ It remains pertinent therefore to summarize the main ways that classical marxists understood how the monogamous, nuclear family with the man doing wage labour and the woman at home served the general economic interests of the bourgeoisie:

- a. The unpaid labour of women in the household saves capital the expense of providing the resources necessary to reproduce the labour force. In South Africa, where women constitute the majority of the population in the "reserves," women's subsistence agriculture supposedly contributed to an adequate family living standard and so historically justified lower than subsistence wages to male migrant workers (Wolpe 1972; Murray 1981; Miles 1987).
- b. The exclusive use of a wife for sexual and other emotional services helps to distract the working man's attention from his condition of wage-slavery, particularly in that a feeling of dominance in his "castle" mitigates the man's alienation and thus blunts his revolutionary potential. This phenomenon has also been widely commented upon in the "reserves," where, because of the exceptionally humiliating and adverse conditions that men encounter in the mining compounds, they may violently assert their masculinity both upon their wives when they return home and against each other. (Murray 1981; Gay 1982; Coplan 1987).
- c. The smallness and isolation of the nuclear family breaks down communities and makes organization among workers more difficult. It also tends to diminish worker militancy, the high responsibility as the 'breadwinner' of a family making the man less likely to go on

⁴ Including Mao (Schram 1969, 258), Castro (Stone 1981, 52) and Machel (Urdang 1985). It is also, essentially, the present view of the African National Congress towards women (ANC 1990). Unless otherwise stated, the following summary of the "function" of "familialism" is culled from Bebel (1971), Engels (1968) and Barrett (1980).

strike or remove his labour than otherwise. The breadwinning man would be supported in this conservatism by a wife living in isolation and fearful of any further deterioration in her condition which worker militancy might create. Conservative political parties traditionally exploited this fear (DuBois 1991), as widely observed in the elections in Lesotho in 1965 and 1970 (Spence 1968, Weisfelder 1972).

- d. Consumption of household goods increases as each small family unit needs those items which once were more efficiently profitable when there is an ideology touting consumerism as the answer to alienation as in much of the West today.
- e. In that regard, the objectification of women (as either mothers or sex objects) is a lucrative sales mechanism.
- f. The patriarchal family serves to instill in children an obedience to authority which coincides with capitalism's need for a docile working force.
- g. In order to survive the drastic fluctuations of demand and profit that are inherent to a free market, capitalism requires that a certain percent of the population be usually or "structurally" unemployed. This "reserve army of labour" is available in times of need to boost production but, once the need passes, it can then be dismissed with relatively little resistance. But how does capitalism define the secondary workers and ensure that they will not rebel against their exploitation in this way? Race and gender being such obvious criteria, they have always been cited foremost among the reasons why certain people are not above all women who remain the "last hired, first fired" (Connelly 1978; UNO 1991).
- h. Women's structural vulnerability, combined with the ideology of women as "the caring sex," has traditionally enabled lower wages for women. This, plus their "ghettoization" in service industries (above all as nurses, teachers, secretaries and domestic workers) subsidizes

capital by providing often essential services at very low cost.

- i. Low wages for women are not only profitable in themselves but also useful as a means to drive down men's wages; the greater means of disciplining or even breaking strong, predominantly male unions. Thus the exodus of American industry to the "NICs" which disproportionately rely upon women workers is stemmed somewhat by the wage cuts taken by American men who fear losing their jobs (Kolko 1988; Stichter and Parpart 1990). In South Africa, the increasing power and militancy of the trade unions is partly combatted by "border industrialization," that is, the transfer of jobs to a largely female, and much cheaper work force in the homeland.

Engels did not suggest that capitalism invented women's subordination but rather that it made many of the oppressive features of the traditional family more severe while at the same time removing the principal economic and community supports which had mitigated women's subordination to men in the pre-capitalist era. Women's resistance to these changes was overcome by a combination of outright coercion and ideological pressure, both largely facilitated through the actions of the liberal state which historically nurtured the growth of capitalism.

Marx argued that the liberal state presents itself as a neutral and democratic force only to obscure its real function to protect and promote the interests of the dominant class. At the level of global capitalism, the dominant class has historically been almost uniformly a white, male bourgeoisie. Their interests however, have never been uniform, and indeed there have often been fundamental differences between "fractions" within them. The liberal democratic state therefore operates primarily to mediate conflicts between groups of capitalists and thereby to stabilize the extreme tendencies of free enterprise.⁵

This is significant to the "Woman Question" because, in that stabilizing capacity, liberal states have historically followed policies which

⁵ Nicos Poulantzas developed this thesis which is incisively applied to South Africa by Davies (1979).

sought to preserve or promote idealized notions of the family which could strike a balance between the contradictory needs of fractions of capital as well as the traditions or desires of the workers themselves. For example, in Southern Africa there were evident and extreme contradictions in the type of family desired for Africans by four white, male, bourgeois groups: the mine-owners with a desire for migrant labour, the manufactures with the need for a more stable urban work force, the commercial farmers who sought to preserve a vaguely traditional rural African in the rural areas, and the missionaries with their "Christian" ideal of a nuclear family peasant producers.⁶ These were all, to varying degrees, in conflict with existing norms of African patriarchy. Consequently, the state was needed to intervene to contain the social damage and political strains which arose from such contradictions (Simons 1969; Chonock 1985; Parpart and Staudt 1989).

Given the multifarious forms of state, different levels of economic development and varieties of traditional culture, it is impossible (and undesirable) to formulate a universal theory of how the state mediates gender conflict. Nevertheless, there are a number of ways in which the state has been used to propagate a gender ideology and enforce gender relations that smooth the way for capital to most efficiently exploit the working class. Some of these include:⁷

- a. An education system which strongly encourages the channelling of women into "traditional" careers and domestic "efficiency" (Robertson 1986; Hunt 1990).
- b. Housing, daycare and welfare policies which are massively biased in

* See Comaroff (1989) for a similar analysis.

† The following points are drawn generally from the voluminous literature on the relationship between the state and gender ideology including: Barrett (1980) for the European experience of "familialism"; Staudt (1987), Stoler (1989), Stichter and Parpart (1988) for a look at colonial regimes; and Parpart and Staudt (1989) for a collection of studies which includes women's relationships to the post-colonial state. A concrete study of how a socialist state exploits and alienates women in pursuit of an enhanced GNP is offered by Scott (1976).

favour of the preferred family ideal. In the West, the preference is still for nuclear families with the woman at home (hence, for instance, public primary schools that demand someone be home to feed the children at lunch - the higher market value of male labour tending to support the ideology that women should be the ones). In South Africa, depending on class and race, the ideal is either a nuclear or divided family. A whole host of laws associated with influx control made it impossible for a black man and wife to live legally together under a variety of circumstances (Bernstein 1985).

- c. Protective legislation (removing women from certain jobs to protect their health or fertility) and tolerance (or enforcement) of unequal wages which discriminate against working women (Humphries 1977; Harding 1986).⁸
- d. Upholding "the coercion of privacy" whereby the state claims it has no right to interfere in the private domain of the household. In colonial Africa, the state had originally attempted to impose "civilized" standards of propriety by, for example, granting women the legal right to divorce or attempting to suppress the custom of bride-price (*lobola* or *bohali*). This had such disruptive effects upon African society however that colonial regimes across the continent soon backtracked. By the early 20th century they went so far as to claim no desire to interfere in "native affairs". Through "Indirect Rule", patriarchal chiefs were strengthened and explicitly directed to control women to keep them from "infesting" the towns (Hay and Wright 1982; Chanock 1985; Cooper 1989; Wilson 1982).⁹

* One irony is that scientists have recently shown that the sperm is actually more sensitive to exposure to harmful substances and radiation than the ovum. The fact that research questioning the "macho sperm theory" is so belated is in itself rather telling evidence of the pervasiveness of sexist priorities in even supposedly objective science.

⁹ Wilson discusses how this patriarchal alliance was resurrected shortly after independence to serve the political needs of Zaire's "helmsman," Mobutu Sese Seko.

- e. Legal double standards which, for example, deny that rape can take place in a marriage or which punish prostitutes rather than male clients. States of all ideological hues have also frequently scapegoated women for much larger problems, including directing public anger away from their own macro-economic problems or neo-colonial impotence by campaigns against prostitutes, women's fashions or small-scale women traders. (Wipper 1972; Schuster 1982; Weiss 1986).
- f. Economic development policies and projects which undermine women's financial autonomy to make them more dependent on a male wage-earner. There have been cases where this was an explicit objective, as when, for example, "Native women" in migrant labour reserves were encouraged to form Home Industries to keep them from abandoning the rural areas for the towns (where their prospects for economic independence were much greater). More often however, it occurs as an unintentional result of "modernisation" and commodification. Thus a matrilineal society in Malawi was fairly rapidly transformed into a patrilineal society as cotton was introduced in the 1930s (Vaughan 1985). To give another example, widows (who comprise up to 30% of the heads of households in Lesotho) were increasingly marginalized or lost their access to land as cash disrupted their traditional usufructuary rights (Basutoland 1950). However unintentional this process may have been, it continues to occur so consistently that it appears to be deliberate policy.¹⁰
- g. Until recently, there was the suppression, prohibition and control of birth control technology and access to abortion (helping to keep women "barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen"). In the Third

¹⁰ Esther Boserup (1970) initiated research into the negative impact of modernization on women in the Third World. "WID", an often radical critique located within the liberal paradigm, has since become a virtual academic discipline of its own. See also Rogers (1980), Chartleton (1984), Staudt (1985) and Moser (1989) for analyses of the gendered nature of aid.

World, where inequitable land distribution, low productivity and high unemployment create a relative overpopulation, the state may take the opposite tack and promote birth control, sometimes (as in India, China and South Africa) so vigorously as to endanger the health and human rights of the "beneficiaries" (Greer 1984).

- h. Psychiatric "care" which treats women who reject their assigned role as neurotic (or "bewitched" or "anti-social") and may subject them to drug, "rest" and even electro-shock therapy to "cure" them (Barrett 1980).

Many marxists have emphasized the coercion behind women's "historic defeat". In addition to the legal controls and barriers described above, sexual violence by individual men against women is both prevalent and in many cases has been tolerated or even encouraged by the liberal state (Mies *et al* 1988; Starhawk 1990). Naked force though was actually considered by Marx to be of less importance in a "bourgeois democracy" than the ideological "superstructure". He held that the bourgeoisie used its domination of the state, the media, the mainstream churches and the universities, to propagate throughout all classes an "inversion" of reality which obscured the real workings of the economy and class structure. In simplistic terms, this "false consciousness" among oppressed groups partially blinds them to the real class position and thereby weakens their opposition to their oppressors. Hence Marx's famous description of religion as "the opiate of the masses."

While the concept of false consciousness has been used by leftist intellectuals (and bureaucrats) to condescend the masses, it is nonetheless true that peasants and women as groups have historically tended to resist revolutionary leadership. They have often not only colluded in their own exploitation and alienation but also vigorously defended it against liberating ideologies (Lenin 1966; 59; Schram 1969; Dubois 1991). Antonio Gramsci's elaboration of the role of ideology and "civil society" is particularly useful in seeking to understand why (Gramsci 1971; Boggs 1976; 1984).

To begin with, Gramsci recognized that religion and folklore are not simply false consciousness but may comprise popular forms of resistance. Indeed folklore may at times represent a very perceptive class consciousness

while "gossip" can be a powerful source of strength against bourgeois obscurantism. This has extremely important implications both for understanding women's political consciousness and for the development of a mass counter-culture and feminist revolutionary strategy (Hartsock 1979; Starhawk 1990).

In an industrialized society however, folklore is often patently in contradiction to lived reality and scientific knowledge. Feminists will also readily acknowledge that women are among their greatest enemies and here again Gramsci offers a crucial insight to understanding why. He argued that bourgeois ideology had gained "hegemony" to the extent that it had now supplanted traditional folk wisdom and become regarded as "common sense." In the United States, for instance, strongly idealized individualism and consumerism inculcates in the working class of a fierce pride in the superiority of capitalism, a system that can provide for their "needs" at the very time it renders many homeless or without basic health care and education. Civil society also dulls mass consciousness of the contradictions of gender oppression. Thus, today, while many women are saddled with the double day of work and housework, overtly sexual advertising encourages fashions and lifestyles that expose women to and often excuse male sexual aggression. Left divided, competitive and in many cases self-loathing by the pervasive ideology of civil society, "women were so perfectly colonized that they policed one another" (Rowbothan 1972). It can be added that, through emotional disorders such as self-induced starvation (anorexia) and vomiting (bulimia), civil society encourages women to police themselves.

To Marx and Engels, the first step towards the goal of women's emancipation was for women to enter the work force. There they would not only acquire economic independence but would also forge revolutionary links with male workers which would lead to the overthrow of capitalism. Bebel added that women needed to join the struggle politically since they could not rely on men to act in their interests. Other early marxists, including Trotsky, Lenin and Kollontai, also recognized that the tenacity of gender ideology precluded any automatic emancipation of women through class struggle. The provision of daycare, kindergarten, public catering facilities, women's organizations, abortion services, adult education etc., were all seen as necessary to compliment the emancipation achieved by legal rights and public

production. These were mostly adopted by marxist regimes in Africa. Zimbabwe, for example, has invested heavily in education. In China, an explicit ideological campaign was launched when, after ten years of revolution, it became clear that men's attitudes towards women were still chauvinistic and resistant to the change of the mode of production inside the household, enforcing men's participation in domestic chores.

On the whole, classical marxists were optimistic that the "fiasco of sexual moralism" could be broken down and abandoned by the working class.

Men's interest in the oppression of women was seen as vestigial and like the state would wither away under socialism. As women gained wealth they would no longer need to prostitute themselves to men or accept oppression in the family. As property became publicly owned, women and men would consequently be freed from the hypocritical fidelity that belied the bourgeois ideal.

Socialist Feminism

Whatever gains were made by women under actually existing socialism, it is undeniable however, that there has been a strong streak of male chauvinism, if not misogynism, among men of the left. The radical feminist movement in the West in the 1960s was to a great extent a reaction against it (Jaggar 1983; Dunayevskaya 1982). But while some marxists in turn reacted to radical feminism with scorn, others have taken it seriously. In particular, the radical feminist insights that the "personal is political" and that patriarchy is reproduced at the family, not the class level, sparked a series of debates within marxism which led to the development of a distinct "socialist feminist" analysis in the 1970s. As part of the general effort to resuscitate "marxism" from the stultifying Stalinist era, women marxists began to re-examine the historical record and theoretical works of the classical marxists, beginning with a critical analysis of Engels' anthropology and assumptions about women's reproductive role.¹¹ The aim was to construct a theory which

¹¹ Reiter (1976) includes classic articles by Karen Sacks and Gayle Rubin. Other important early socialist feminist texts include Eisenstein (1979), Sergeant (1981) and Kelly (1984).

makes explicit, and therefore more accurately expresses, the nature of the relationship between gender and class. The term "socialist feminist" was employed to capture the broad acceptance of the revolutionary goals and methodology of historical materialism at the same time as a rejection of the "androcentric" tendencies of traditional marxism.

By now there is a general consensus among socialist feminists that even those classical marxists who were sincere in their concerns about women's emancipation espoused a form of class struggle that accepted some of the most basic notions which were used to rationalize women's oppression under capitalism. These included the private/public dichotomy and the "naturalistic fallacy" that it is normal and natural for most women to exist and feel most fulfilled in the private, domestic realm.¹² In practice, marxists were seen to be prone to dogmatic either/or distinctions, a linear concept of time, a functionalist, teleological view of society, and a blurry notion of 'reproduction' and women's altruism which were at odds with most women's socialization. Their language was often, and not always unconsciously, patronizing to women.¹³ The Leninist strategy of a revolutionary vanguard, that is, a small core of totally dedicated cadres conversant in jargon and androcentric theory was seen and denounced as particularly exclusive of women.¹⁴

Part of the problem identified by socialist feminists is the "gender-blind" nature of Marx's terminology. "Class" for instance assumes that male and female consciousness within an economic group will be the same. It also

¹² Engels, for instance, asserted that communism would "transform the relations between the sexes into a purely private matter which concerns only the person involved and into which society has no occasion to intervene." (Rowbotham 1972, 76).

¹³ Bebel is much worse than Engels in that respect (Bebel 1971, 378 for example).

¹⁴ See Lenin's diatribe against Zetkin (who had organized women's discussion groups on the subject of sex and marriage) for her lack of "wide-ranging, profound knowledge, and the fullest Marxist mastery of a vast amount of material" (Lenin 1966, 102). Feminists like Delphy (1984) and Barrett (1980) were not, of course, the only one to take Marxism - Leninism to task for this. Gramsci, E. P. Thompson and much of the "neo-marxist" school have made many of the same criticisms.

assumes that wives, because they share their husbands' "family wage," would also share basically the same class consciousness. In fact, there is much evidence to show these assumptions unwarranted, especially in the Third World where the non-pooling household and migrant labour mean that wives of peasants or workers are frequently petty capitalists in the informal economy. As such, they not only have a quite different relationship to the means of production but to the state as well which tends, worldwide, to be hostile to the informal sector. Women are often solely responsible for domestic budgeting, including education costs for the children. In cases where husbands demand money or where wives conceal their income to protect themselves and their children, the husband may even be a "class enemy".

Another key marxist term, "production," was also defined in such a way as to ignore the reality of most women's lives. Housewives, because their labour does not create "exchange value" and is not directly exploited by capital, were not considered to be engaged in production. Their domestic labour provides only goods and services with "use value" and so, although it indirectly enhances the surplus value which accrues to the capitalist, women's work was defined (and reduced in theoretical importance) as reproduction (Barrett 1980; Delphy 1984).

This emphasis on narrowly-defined production was also seen to contribute to a seemingly naive faith in unlimited industrial and technological expansion, again an Enlightenment notion that in practice has impinged upon women's lives more heavily than men. As the sex which is generally responsible for most water, fuel and food collection and production in the Third World, women have been hit particularly hard by environmental degradation.¹⁵

A key element of socialist feminist theory then is to "stretch" marxist terminology to give women's labour and standpoint due recognition. Principally this involves expanding the notion of production to include all labour which contributes to the accumulation of capital, even if it does so indirectly. In this way women's household labour, child-bearing and rearing

¹⁵ Davidson (1988) and, for a case study of the interplay of drought, international aid and women's changing socio-economic role in Africa, Hemmings-Gapihan (1982).

and the sexual and emotional services she provides to bolster her alienated man's buffeted ego can all be considered productive. Indeed, without this "sex-affective production" capitalism could not function as it could not then rely upon a docile working class. The so-called domestic labour debate focuses on the extent that "women's work" has been made invisible while it in fact comprises "the hidden half of capitalist organization and exploitation" (Armstrong 1983, 13). Some marxists, have even argued for wages for housework in order to make that labour visible, despite the danger that this might legitimize women's ghettoization in the home.¹⁶

In a similar way, the notion of class has had to be stretched to acknowledge the reality that women may often have a different class position and consciousness than what might be predicted from their relationship to their husbands or fathers. Socialist feminists call attention to the fact that the household is not a unified or coherent unit but may be the site of considerable economic struggle. In this way they assert that gender ideology and the sexual division of labour can have deep repercussions in class formation and class struggle. Bozzoli, for example, shows how the contrasting patriarchy of the Afrikaners and Africans in South Africa affected their mutual process of proletarianization. Essentially, Afrikaner patriarchs sent their daughters off to the burgeoning cities and remained themselves on the land while African patriarchs either went themselves or despatched their sons, leaving women behind to manage the farm. This initiated a pattern of oscillating migration that in the long run had disastrous economic and political consequences for the African. A growing literature on colonial Zimbabwe also shows the centrality of gender ideology and struggle in the process of class formation (Schmidt 1991; Barnes 1992).

A key question remains, how does patriarchy, which appears in so many different forms and historical circumstances, relate to the material base of a society? The classical marxist view that it arose from the capitalist class structure was clearly unsatisfactory, not least of all because of its tenacious persistence in actually existing socialism. Socialist feminists, using Gramsci's notions about civil society and Althusser's concept of "relative autonomy,"

¹⁶ The domestic labour debate is reviewed in Secombe (1980).

began to argue that gender ideology and class structures were formed simultaneously rather than one deriving from or depending on the other. Patriarchy and capitalism could then be seen as distinct although symbiotic. Thus the "sex/gender system" (which defines masculine and feminine behaviour) operates alongside the mode of production (which defines class structure) to make "the two fundamentally determining and constituting elements of society" (Chodorow 1979, 85).

In this "dual systems" analysis, capitalism provides a hierarchy but leaves it to patriarchal (and racist) ideology to fill the places (Hartmann 1981). Patriarchal values, which include "truncated" notions of sensuality and creativity (Hartsock 1985) and "surplus repression" of sexuality (Hamilton 1986), are reproduced generation after generation through male-controlled structures of production, reproduction, sexuality and the socialization of children which reinforce each other to "overdetermine" our belief that the sex/gender system is somehow natural (Mitchell 1974; Chodorow 1974).

In this view, it was neither essential (biologically) nor strictly functional (economically) for capitalism to have developed in so thoroughly a patriarchal manner. Rather, to use Miles' term for the persistence of racism, patriarchy is an "anomalous necessity" (Miles 1987). It is an anomaly in the sense that a fully "humanized" workforce would, as John Stuart Mill logically pointed out, offer greater opportunities for exploitation than one in which the education and skill of half are undeveloped or neglected. Yet it is a necessity in the sense that in any historical and cultural setting, capitalism develops by following the path of least resistance. Thus, given the short-term nature of capitalist thinking, the construction of a gender ideology based on equality was, however logical, too difficult, messy and long-term. Instead, in an *ad hoc* process, those features of the existing feudal sex/gender system which were most conducive to capital accumulation tended to be preserved or strengthened while those which were inimical "withered away." The pre-capitalist subordination of women was retained or deepened while certain other features of the old patriarchy (such as the extended family and chivalry) died out.¹⁷ The same would apply to actually existing socialist regimes

¹⁷ Barrett (1980) is one of the strongest proponents of this view which Murray (1981) develops with rich empirical evidence in the case of Lesotho.

which, obsessed by survival in a hostile international environment, tend to adopt the apparently easiest route of "primitive accumulation" based upon the exploitation of the "the last colony," women (Mies *et al.* 1988).

The dialectic between capitalism and patriarchy is so intimate that some socialist feminists deny there is any theoretical distinction between them, arguing instead that they comprise a "unified system" (Young 1981; Mies 1986). Yet whether or not class and gender oppression are theoretically distinct and the subordination of women is anomalous or intrinsic to capitalist logic, the fact is that the present sexual division of labour is very entrenched and profitable. It therefore remains an overwhelming strong disincentive for either capital or the bureaucratic state to take the risks entailed in promoting a radical restructuring of society. Indeed, the ideology of "familialism" and consumerism continues to be exported world-wide, even to the point of occasioning American bluster against its economic rivals.¹⁸ To a certain extent therefore, it is a moot point whether capitalism and patriarchy are unified or distinct the struggle for women's, and therefore human liberation must take place on both fronts.

The Postmodern Feminist Critique

The idea that women can be liberated, or indeed that there is such a thing as women, has been challenged recently by the postmodern critique of "totalizing metanarratives."¹⁹ Basically, this holds that attempts to find a root social source of female subordination which could be considered the common denominator of gender relations in all cultures are "falsely universalizing." Postmodernism insists that modern metanarratives (that is, those grand visions of the world and human nature which arose from the Enlightenment including

¹⁸ With Japan, for instance, through the "Structural Impediment Initiative" of 1989 which essentially demanded cultural changes along those lines as a step to improve trade relations. One can also only wonder where Islam may fit into a New World Order where liberal values are hegemonic. Kolko (1991).

¹⁹ See Lovibond (1989), Tong (1989), Nicholson (1990) and Parpart (1992) for succinct and balanced critiques of the post modern debate.

liberalism, marxism and feminism) are necessarily exclusive of alternative experiences and perspectives. That is to say, in the quest for a universally applicable doctrine such as reason, class struggle or gender inequality, modern philosophies with even the most ostensibly emancipatory objectives suppress discourses or viewpoints which undermine their authority. Thus marxism, with its emphasis on production, is attacked for representing a narrow "episteme" or mode of thinking which is specific to Western, industrial culture.

Western feminists also come under attack for their insensitivity to alternative experiences of sexism and women's varied life experiences. Chodorow in particular is attacked for her assumptions, presumably drawn from her own Western, bourgeois background, about the cultural importance of mothering. There is also the problem of idealizing "women's standpoint," with postmodernists arguing that gender is only one of many categories which divide and determine our consciousness (and may, in fact, be less significant than race, sexual orientation, age or other physical characteristics).

Many marxists have responded to the postmodernism with barely disguised contempt (Callinicos 1989; Palmer 1990). Their attacks rest upon the charge that postmodernists, by denying the validity of class and gender oppression, seem to be saying that each individual experiences the world so differently that no unifying theory, and hence no coherent political strategy, is possible. This is so close to the liberal celebration of the individual that it is perhaps not surprising that it has found such popularity in the epitome of liberal institutions, universities in the West.

Not all postmodern theorists are so extreme however and, in fact, postmodern feminists have attacked the elitism and implicit misogyny of some male postmodernists. They offer a more nuanced critique of marxism and Western feminism which is not, at root, incompatible with historical materialism. Nicholson and Fraser, for instance call for research to be, "explicitly historical, attuned to the cultural specificity of different societies and to that of different groups within societies and periods" (Fraser and Nicholson 1990, 34). Categories or "structures" which are posited for the sake of analysis or comparison must be "framed by a historical narrative and rendered temporally and culturally specific".

Far from comprising a retreat from historical materialism, this is

actually reminiscent of Marx, some of whose most virulent attacks were upon the "ready-roasted pigeons of absolute knowledge" which both bourgeois philosophers and his own followers were formulating.²⁰ Marx also explicitly and repeatedly attacked those who sought to reduce human history to a formula. He noted, for instance, how:

events of striking analogy, because they took place in a different historical milieu, led to entirely different results. If one studies each of these development by itself and then compares them to each other, one will easily find the key to each phenomenon, *but one would never attain a universal key to a general historico-philosophical theory, whose greatest advantage lies in its being beyond history* (Marx 1979, 321: my emphasis).

The postmodern "attention to difference" has been adopted by many Third World feminists as a defence against "discursive colonization" by Western feminists who tend to portray them as homogeneously powerless or "Other." (Papart 1991; Mohanty *et al* 1991; see also Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983; Lazreg 1988). Overcoming that tendency demands the "deconstruction" of discourse and cultural subjectivity to discover what power relations are implicit in the language. Again, this is not at all incompatible with historical materialism. Providing that sensitivity to the specifics of each situation does not overwhelm one's commitment to the broader political project, Marx would surely agree with the postmodern demand that research aim, not at an absolute truth, but "to produce less partial or perverse representations" of history and society (Harding 1990, 100).

Marx himself, reflecting the biases of his era, felt that the working class possessed a clear understanding of the economic and political forces at work which subjected it to its oppression. Socialist feminists amend this to assert that gender operates at a distance from ownership of the means of production and the socializing effects for mass production to influence class

²⁰ Marx (1979, 30). See also Engels' letters to C. Schmidt and J. Bloch in 1890 in Marx and Engels (1968, 689 and 693).

consciousness. Thus women, because of their relatively greater alienation from both capital and the principal sources of patriarchal ideology as well as their greater social and biological involvement in physical reproduction, tend to possess a clearer understanding of the real (materialist) nature of the world. The woman's standpoint is held up not as a universal truth or ideal but as an "epistemology grounded in reproduction" which is neither inclusive of all women nor exclusive of all men. A sensitivity to that epistemology can help explain and overcome many of the shortcomings of both liberal and classical marxist analysis and political strategy (Hartsock 1987; Flax 1983).²¹

Gender and Historical Analysis in Southern Africa

However well it stands up to radical feminist or postmodern critiques, what specifically can be achieved through an elaborate theory of women's standpoint which cannot be done through solid empirical research without theory? The answer is twofold. In the first place, the explicit emphasis on gender issues means the historian must make a concerted search for a largely "invisible" factor - women. Because women were generally disregarded by the overwhelmingly male colonial officials, missionaries, journalists and other early historians, their activities were generally not recorded in detail. Frequently their actions were ascribed to their husbands or other men or, if deemed newsworthy, denigrated by honour or sexist stereotype. The Aba "women's war" of 1929 in Nigeria is an example. By describing it in terms such as "disturbance" and riot," the colonial authorities discursively reduced it from what it in fact was; a massive, well-organized, tax revolt and anti-colonial protest. Until recovered in 1972, historians likewise did not consider it worthy of mention or further research (van Allen 1972).

To give another example, the recent discovery by the World Bank that much of its development assistance has actually been worsening conditions for women, turns out to have been articulately expressed over fifty

²¹ "Eco-feminism" religion" would appear to be saying much the same thing (Starhawk 1990). Flax, however, cautions against idealizing women's standpoint by suggesting that the psychological damage caused to women by being socialized in a patriarchal society may be more significant than any materialist perception they gain (Flax 1990).

years ago. Mary Blacklock, a tropical doctor, observed how the "prejudices" (read: sexism) of male colonial officials combined with the cultural inhibitions of the local people to seriously undermine the health and social position of women. Her lucid report was circulated to all the British colonies for the edification of the men on the spot but, it seems then promptly forgotten (Blacklock 1936).

One of the reasons for this seemingly wilful amnesia was that the information was not agreeable to the economic, social or political visions of the majority of men in power. In the case of Europeans in colonial Africa, they preferred to project inappropriate Victorian ideals of the family, work and sexual more onto African women. In the case of African men, they often colluded with these in order to gain advantages in the new colonial situation at the expense of women. Thus arose a curious alliance of administrators, Christian missionaries and African patriarchs who "invented" traditions that were then used to repress efforts by women to take advantage of new avenues of escape from male domination (Ranger 1983; Chanock 1982). Male historians went along with this to effectively expunge the record of "unimportant" details like the Aba revolt or female migration.

One of the main achievements of the socialist feminist theory therefore is the inspiration it provides to the recovery of women's true role in history. That is to say, socialist feminists must go back over the record to find evidence of women's activities that had been left out of earlier history books. In addition, they recognize that language is a form of power and therefore attempt to decipher the discourse employed at the time to reveal the implicit assumptions that were made about women and "proper" gender roles. They check oral and non-historical sources such as anthropology or musicology in order to balance the prevailing tendency of the written sources to regard the deeds of great men as the only historically interesting facts (Kelly 1984; Stanley 1990).

This brings us to the question of the ultimate objective of socialist feminist research. It is *not* simply to accrue more interesting facts, rather, it has an explicitly revolutionary goal. By seeking to provide a solid basis of empirical evidence; it aims to strengthen the case for radical changes in present-day patriarchal capitalism. It is therefore "advocacy" research which requires the historian to assume an explicit moral position. The clear

advantage of such explicitness is that it allows for greater honesty than the implicit moral position (acceptance of the status quo) which lurks behind false claims of objectivity and pure empiricism.

The danger in advocacy however, just as Marx experienced, is that it can degenerate fairly easily into polemics which may discredit the intellectual argument. Mining the historical record to find "proof" for preconceived ideas may also mislead the researcher into blind alleys that would ultimately detract from the overall objective. It is essential therefore to resist this tendency as, indeed, the honest, self-conscious criticism of one's subjectivity should allow. Postmodernism is valuable in this as it reminds us to be constantly on guard against the false universalizing which may creep, often unconsciously, into our research and writing. Postmodernism should therefore be welcomed to the extent that it contributes to "insistent" materialism.²²

Finally, the evidence should be presented in a manner that contributes as effectively as possible to those struggles as they are unfolding in the present. That is to say, the academic assumes a moral commitment to translate pure research into political activity, even if it is through an effort to make the results of the research known beyond the narrow confines of academia. Ideally, such research should reach the people, who may often be illiterate, who can directly benefit from it in their own political struggles. Consciousness of this may, at the very least, avert us from the kind of "intellectual gardenpath" which has characterized earlier debates (Clarence-Smith 1985).

This type of research has indeed recovered a great deal of women's history in Southern Africa over the last few years. For example, their role in the resistance against apartheid and colonial rule has been shown to have been much greater than previously assumed. Women acted as spiritual leaders

²² The term is Nancy Hartsock's (1979, 1985), although it echoes Marx's own *ruthless criticism of all that exists*, ruthless also in the sense that criticism does not fear its results and even less to a struggle with existing powers (letter to Arnold Ruge 1843; Marx 1979, 30). See also Dunayevskaya (1982, 73) who quotes Rosa Luxemburg's demand of marxists; "The unmercifully thorough division of (their) own inadequacies and weaknesses".

exhorting men to take up arms. Mbuya Nehanda of Zimbabwe helped to unite Shona tribes against the British settlers in 1896-7. In Mozambique, a similar role was played by a young girl called Mbuya. In 1917 she urged the squabbling Barwe, Tonga and other tribes in the Zambezi Valley to unite to expel the Portuguese and then "constantly pressured (the rebels) to adopt a more militant position" (Isaacman 1976, 223). Women from early on also played a leading role in more modern forms of opposition to colonial rule and the newly developing class relations among Africans. As early as 1898, women in the Orange Free State submitted a petition to protest the imposition of passes on men and in 1919 were at the forefront of the anti-pass campaign in the Transvaal. Although women were not themselves issued with passes, and though they comprised as little as 8% of Johannesburg population, they made up 58% of arrests. This was, as the Native Commissioner concluded, because "women did in all the their power to incite and encourage men to take action against the police" (Ginwala 1986).

Such militancy was even more marked in the 1913 anti-pass protests in the Orange Free State, a campaign that successfully dissuaded any further attempt to compel women to carry passes for another 40 years. Women also led passive resistance to land registration, exploitative shop-keepers and poll taxes - their tactics are said to have inspired Mahatma Gandhi in his campaigns (Walker 1982, 31). In the 1920s women protested when the government tried to restrict them from brewing and selling beer and against the inferior type of education that was being offered their children from government schools but then, when the state tried to force the children back, the *Amafela* or die-hards, opened their own independent schools (Beinart 1987, 334). These campaigns occasionally erupted into violence, with women burning down municipal beer halls, rioting and destroying government property. As one historian put it, exclusively female protest was "characterized by an appetite for confrontation qualitatively sharper than that usually displayed by those in which men predominated" (Lodge 1983, 139).

The same has been observed in the wars of liberation in Southern Africa. To Samora Machel, for example, the formation of a Women's Detachment of FRELIMO 1966 was politically expedient since their desire for sexual liberation made them a powerful ally against the narrowly nationalist or bourgeois tendency within the party (Isaacman 1983, 98). Much the same

applied in Zimbabwe, where the male leadership of the main guerilla army conceded that "Women were more politically conscious, more revolutionary and more involved in the armed struggle since the war was happening in the rural areas - where the women were" (Weiss 1986, 79). In French Africa, Molita Keita observed that:

in all the territories women have taken part in militant action with more enthusiasm than men. While the latter are less liable to discouragement, the women on the other hand are less responsive to offers of place and office, and thus less open to corruption. (Little 1973, 63).

To consider the specific example of Lesotho, several themes merge to revise the impression that women were generally passive and downtrodden. Economically, women played a crucial role in sustaining the territory as a migrant labour reserve. Women were not simply reproducers or items of exchange -- "the greatest article of commerce" and "almost the only trade of the country" (Eldredge 1986, 251). Rather, they were pre-eminent producers in even the narrowest definition. Women performed an estimated 60-80% of agricultural production, their tasks traditionally including hoeing, weeding, harvesting, bird-scaring, winnowing, and irrigation if necessary. Women in Southern Africa in general were also responsible for virtually all food preparation and the production of important household and trade items, especially pottery, grassworks and beer. The introduction of modern technology and increased male migrancy has tended to increase the work load even more (Boserup 1970; Eldredge 1991). Women's "homemakers'" associations, with their nationwide efforts to improve vegetable gardening and develop small-scale income generating activities, then had an arguably crucial role in revitalizing a moribund village economy after the devastating years of the Great Depression (Basutoland 1936; Epprecht 1992). Women's church organizations have also come under closer scrutiny for their role in resisting the disruptive effects of migrant labour and apartheid (Gaitskill 1990) while Basotho women's migration to urban areas of South Africa, hitherto considered relatively minor compared to male migrancy, is increasingly being understood as dangerously disruptive to the whole migrant labour system.

The control of "runaway wives" was therefore a central, if understated, objective of the colonial and South African states (Kimble 1985; Bonner 1990; Epprecht 1992). In the modern economy, women are also increasingly employed (*à la maquilladores*) in the so-called border industrial zones of Lesotho, the "homelands" and Swaziland. Their economic role there, as well as their current attempts to unionize domestic workers, their domination of the "squatter" campaign in South Africa and of working class recreation (as "shebeen queens") gives them "the most pervasive proletarian consciousness in the country."²³

In addition to recovering women's role in history, socialist feminism seeks to re-interpret existing social science to take fuller account of women's views. The fact is that these were in many cases quite different from those of the men who wrote about women's status or who simply assumed that women held the same views as men on the major issues of the day. Actually consulting women and making a concerted effort to understand their specific needs and perceptions of "rationality" makes it increasingly difficult to accept such assumptions and interpretations.

For example, it begins to demand a thorough re-interpretation of the view that traditional culture was uniformly oppressive to women. It would be wrong to romanticize such patriarchal African customs and institutions as slavery or clitoridectomy, however a more balanced view of them is in order not least of all because women were (and still are) sometimes among their staunchest defenders. Rather than dismissing this as an example of "false consciousness" or natural female conservatism, feminist analyses have concluded that there were often real benefits to women in prestige, economic security and, in some cases, political power which were otherwise not attainable. For instance, African women frequently owned slaves or pawns, using them to do "women's work." When slavery was abolished by the

²³ Malahleha (1985, 53). See also Cock (1988), Berger (1986), Kuzwayo (1985) and Cole (1987) for discussions of women's role in trade unions and other forms of resistance to apartheid in South Africa. Bozzoli (1991) is also invaluable in the way she allows the Africans to speak for themselves about events surrounding industrialization and apartheid, offering often surprising views on the roles of women in the these developments.

colonial administration, it was primarily women who suffered from the loss of one of the few economic resources available to them, the burden of slave labour in effect being transferred to wives (Robertson and Klein, 1983). Polygyny in that context could have the benefit of relieving women from the full brunt of labour required to maintain a household while *lobola* or *bohali*, disparaged by missionaries as the buying of wives with cattle, is still regarded by some women throughout Southern Africa as a major pillar of marital stability and economic leverage (Murray 1981, 128, 148). Even *purdah* had advantages, offering elite Moslem women economic opportunities not available to lower classes of women or men (Schildkrout 1982). "Traditional femininity," from domesticity to nubility rites to sexual submissiveness, has also at times been employed by women as a conscious and deliberate strategy to win economic and broadly, political advantages (White 1988; Brydon 1987; Ramphele 1989).

The socialist feminist approach does not, however, simply mean writing women's history. Gender involves relations between women and men and consequently also demands attention to how ideas, roles and stereotypes of masculinity changed over time and their implications for women and far class struggle. Thus far, historians have paid little concern to the socialization of boys or the effects upon their consciousness of the humiliations, violence and privations they experience as migrant labourers. There is evidence to suggest, however, that there may be a relationship between the alienation and repression which young men experienced and the politics of radical nationalism (Coplan 1987; Dunbar-Moodie 1988; White 1990; Epprecht 1992).

Lesotho again can provide a fertile field in which to test the utility of socialist feminist theory. The migrant labour system has resulted in such an imbalance in the sex ratio that the role of women in the country has received perhaps more consideration than anywhere else in Africa. While there may be an abundance of data however, most of it reflects a historical and sexist assumptions about women. From the earliest missionaries, who perceived Basotho women as chattel through a misunderstanding of the nature of *bohali*, to researchers in more recent times, there has been a tendency to accept, and reify, notions about Basotho women's "natural" roles, passivity and conservatism. Thus it is asserted that women are "more conservative than

men and jealous of their traditions" (Ashton 1952, 57) and "generally more attached to the existing moral and social fabric" (Weisfelder 1972, 135). This factor is then held to explain why women supported Basutoland National Party (BNP) in numbers large enough to upset the Basutoland Congress Party (BCP) in 1965. Women, "who appear to be conservative and concerned to maintain the economic link with South Africa," are deemed to have chosen narrow "bread and butter" issues over those espoused by the Congress and the majority of men with their long term (reasoned, progressive) view of the need to liberate South Africa (Spence 1968, 44).

It is certainly undeniable that women are subordinate to men in Sesotho custom, and there is an abundance of literature which describes this²⁴. Rather than simple description however, the objective of socialist feminist analysis is to look behind the developments which led to the present oppressive structures, illustrating ways that the subordination and exploitation of women has changed over time. More importantly, it then seeks to relate these changes to the larger political economy, observing in the combination of women's resistance and collaboration with changing patriarchal structures a profound influence upon the restructuring of the state and economy.

So little research has been done on the historical dimension of gender ideology that the field is wide open and for the moment rather speculative. Kimble offers a tentative analysis of the "triple squeeze" upon women in the early 20th century through the assertiveness of the chiefly class, the promotion of migrant labour by the colonial state and the commodification of production. Together these resulted in women's (mainly widows') increasing marginality. This in turn led them to adopt what the colonial government regarded as problematic strategies of survival, namely, women's flight to the Union of South Africa, prostitution and the brewing of illicit liquor. By the 1930s, the colonial government had come to regard widows especially as nothing less than "a nuisance and a danger to the community" and as such the target of a wide range of policies to control them (Kimble 1985, Bonner 1990; Epprecht 1992).

²⁴ See Gay (1980, 1982) and Murray (1981) for starters. Guy (1990) offers a general analysis of the "Oppression and exploitation" of women in precapitalist Southern Africa which is applicable to the Basotho as well.

My own research has revealed an extraordinary chauvinism on the part of the colonial administration which has important implications for our understanding of the chieftainship and constitutional developments in the 1950s and 60s. For all the talk of women's "natural" conservatism, there is ample evidence which suggests that the British feared women's adoption of non-traditional roles as a source of great instability. They hedged on granting universal suffrage, despite their own findings that the majority of Basotho women *and men* wanted it.²⁵ The British also regarded women, because they were wearing away the "patriarchal character of the chieftainship," as one of the root causes of the jealousy and intrigue which led to the "epidemic" of ritual murders in the 1940s and 50s.²⁶ In the 1960s, women as supporters of the Congress Party were regarded as "prime mover(s) and intimidator(s)" who incited such violence as the 1961 riot in Maseru (Basutoland 1962).

The British had a fairly consistent policy of trying to contain the efforts of women to break out of traditional and new constraints. Basically, this involved stiffening the traditional spine of overly "liberal" chiefs. In other words, African patriarchs were reminded to be more patriarchal and chastised on those occasions when they erred on the side of giving in to women's demands.²⁷ The British also resisted the decision of the chiefs in the National Council to allow women to become chiefs in their own right (Basutoland 1950, 95).

One possible conclusion to be drawn from all of this is that the mass of women, who continued to live in the "moral economy" of Lesotho's

²⁵ Perhaps their reluctance stemmed from the fact that the majority of the educated elite and "bourgeois" elements of Basotho society (male) strenuously opposed the vote for women. (Basutoland 1963; Robert Matji interview).

²⁶ *Liretlo* file, Morija archives; interviews. Jingoos, (1975, 153) also comments on women's "power hunger" behind these murders.

²⁷ That is, where their decisions "interfere too much with the right of the head of the family (and) jeopardize his authority". The reader is directed to Epprecht (1992) for a full discussion of the history of women and gender in the economy, society, Christian churches and politics of Lesotho throughout the colonial era.

"feudal" chieftainship, were accorded greater respect and opportunity for autonomous development than the British regarded as compatible with stable capitalist development on South Africa's periphery. Notions about British modernity and women's supposed conservatism are turned upside-down: the traditional elite offering to open avenues for women's emancipation and the modern elite offering a revised and pernicious system of male domination. Carrying this further would then demand a re-assessment of women's role in the politics leading up to independence, particularly the support they allegedly gave to the party of the chiefs, the BNP.

Conclusion

This essay has covered a great deal of territory and many 'isms,' not, it must be stressed, to posit a new and greater ism or key to universal understanding. Rather, a general overview of the historical development of socialist feminist theory allows three specific points to be drawn which are directly relevant to research, analysis and political activism in Southern Africa.

Firstly, the notion of "post-marxism" rests upon a misunderstanding or misrepresentation of marxism. Marx was not Stalin. He was not even Lenin. To suggest that Marx, because of atrocities and disappointments associated with his name, is no longer important is to risk undermining one's theoretical strength. That is, if, as post-Marxists claim and I support, the dialectical materialist method remains essential to the struggle against capitalism and patriarchy, then to ground our understanding of that method in a reading of *The Communist Manifesto* alone or secondary and even hostile interpretations of Marx is, to lose some of its explanatory power. It can only hone our theoretical tools to derive them from a critical reading of the marxist classics.

Likewise, the rush to condemn the failure of marxist-inspired regimes leads to a failure to study and analyze seriously the achievements of actually existing socialism. While these have been a disappointment to women in many ways, they should still be seen as a predominantly sincere attempt to restructure society which had many successes as well as failures. To cut oneself off from this wealth of experience and debate is to narrow the range of options to be considered in the next stage of the struggle, in many cases to

liberal or idealist assumptions about human nature, economics or political leadership. In short, this is not a time to abandon the study of marxism and marxist regimes. On the contrary, their historical record needs to be analyzed and assessed all the more rigorously now if we are to understand what went wrong and right and where to go next.

Secondly, while it is important to note the constraints which were put upon actually existing socialism by a hostile international environment (for these constraints are still present and may be even stronger in the near future), it is also undeniable that marxists have been prone to chauvinist and anti-democratic tendencies. Marxists must concede this and move beyond the defence of the 19th century jargon which Marx employed. Socialist feminist theory has shown that this is possible and that marxism and feminism are not only compatible but are also essential to each other. While feminism needs class analysis to keep it grounded in the material world, marxism needs feminism to keep it from reproducing the sexist (and racist and classiest) assumptions inherent in much of modern discourses.

Finally, that postmodernism also deserves to be taken seriously. Much of it is anti-marxist and anti-feminist. However, to the extent that it encourages greater sensitivity to different cultures and values and thereby helps to avert the "imperialist" tendencies of Western feminists and marxists, postmodernism need not be anti-political. On the contrary, it may offer greater scope to broaden and democratize the political opposition to capitalism and patriarchy.

Using marxist concepts that have been "stretched" to include a sensitivity to the standpoint of women and which accord their reproductive activities an equal theoretical value as men's productive activities, socialist feminists have equipped themselves for the tasks of recovering women's history and seeking to explore the relationship between gender and class. To this, a postmodern sensitivity to the patriarchal nature of much of Western epistemology and language imbues a greater awareness of the ways that historians, including marxists, have unconsciously ignored or diminished women. Cutting through the pervasive "claptrap" of gender ideology by an historically specific examination of the household's adaptation to the capitalist economy is therefore an imperative research need. This is especially true in a region, like Southern Africa, where capitalism has developed with such an

extreme gender imbalance.

In conclusion, the socialist feminist approach has so far made the important revelation that the women of Southern Africa were not simply passive or inherently conservative historical actors. On the contrary, women played an active if often obscure and subtle part in the transformation of the pre-capitalist economy. The failure to appreciate this or to be sensitive to women's discourses of resistance has not only frustrated development efforts but has also been a major political liability to radical movements in the past which could continue to thwart the revolutionary transformation of the region.

Future research could address this failure by seeking women's voices and establishing a perspective of historical events which may differ significantly from the dominant (male, elite) views. In that way, historians can fight for democracy and social change in Southern Africa, amassing an empirical base from which to challenge the prevailing, disempowering assumptions or stereotypes about women and gender.

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