
Conference 133: The Continuing Subordination of Women in the Development Process

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Theme I: The Sexual Division of Labour in Rural Production Systems

Originally it had been intended to consider two separate topics—the sexual division of labour in social production and the intervention of capital in rural production systems. However, the papers offered were so overlapping in content that the two topics were amalgamated. The theme is of major importance not only because improving agricultural production (in terms of land and labour productivity as well as modernising type of output) absorbs such a large proportion of recent development thinking, but also because of its clear implications for those most neglected of farmers, Third World women.

Nonetheless, despite the considerable literature on changes in organisation of agricultural production brought about both by planned development schemes and by unplanned consequences of development of other sectors, little real understanding has been gained of the effects of such changes on women. This is demonstrated by the quite meagre development of conceptual tools and by the contradictory assessments of the changes that have taken place in women's roles. Does capitalisation of agriculture lead to intensification of women's work or their increased marginalisation; to declining female productivity; to increased control over female labour by males or lessened social control by individual males; to increasing independence for wives or to increasing incidence of female headed households? Some of these questions were addressed in the papers and took up much of the discussion.

In the plenary¹ the concept of social production was discussed and a number of key points made: first, that when discussing women's domestic work, the distinction between the terms *social* and *socialised* must be maintained; thereby avoiding the mispecification of women's domestic work as 'private' (cf Engels) implying that it is neither social labour nor socialised work.

Second, that the distinction between the *social division of labour* (the production of different commodities within different sectors) and the *technical division of labour* (the allocation of labourers to different tasks within the work place or labour process) is of importance in understanding women's position within social production, since these divisions are found everywhere to correlate with the *sexual division of labour*. For example, in Britain women primarily work in sectors offering the lowest pay; they also work in the lowest skilled and worst paid jobs within the individual firm. The critical question to be answered is: what factors allocate women to these positions?

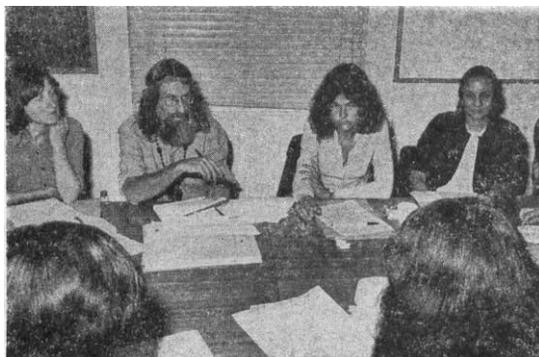
Third, that capitalism itself does not have a sexual division of labour specific to it but rather incorporates pre-existing forms of it within its typically hierarchical labour process. These gender divisions, when embodied in the capitalist labour process, constitute a new material form of contradiction between men and women. This suggests a critical analytical point. Since gender differentiation and women's subordination exist in pre-capitalist societies, any analysis of the process of transition to capitalism must focus on an already constituted sexual division of labour, and on the form in which this is embodied in the social and economic relations of a given society. Lastly, Mackintosh pinpoints four questions of key concern:

- The sexual division in wage labour:** how are gender hierarchies embodied within the labour process as the capitalist wage labour force is created in the periphery?
- Exploitation of non-wage labour:** how is a surplus extracted from non-wage work, particularly where commodity production is based on, or forced upon, households and the unpaid work of women?
- Indirect exploitation of non-wage labour:** how is the organisation of the production and distribution of items not entering into the market,

¹ *The Sexual Division of Labour in Social Production* by Maureen Mackintosh.

particularly subsistence food crops produced by women, indirectly affected by capitalist relations?

—**Domestic labour:** how does domestic labour get perpetuated within new relations of production, and often comes to constitute a particularly rigid feature of the sexual division of labour?



The discussion largely centred on the last of the plenary's points: the incorporation of pre-existing gender divisions. Some participants suggested that the transition needs to be periodised—initially the sexual division may be altered, but growing resistance may reconstitute it. This resistance may derive from concern (often on the part of the State) as to the ability of labour to reproduce itself, or to loss of privilege on the part of the more powerful section of labour. Most participants stressed that while pre-existing gender divisions are often taken over, nonetheless capitalists and colonialists took with them some of the Western European Christian ideas about marriage, family and correct gender relations. This imposition of western values is especially clear in the interventions by missionaries of the various western faiths in the colonised peoples' marriage and sexual customs, and inheritance patterns. It is less obvious that they also imposed their own values and concepts, particularly in sectors of new employment (e.g. nursing, school teaching, secretarial work, etc.), and in their failure to provide technical training (especially in agriculture) for women.

It was agreed that any analysis of the sexual division of labour must first examine women's roles in *reproduction* and how these are reconciled with involvement in production. Given that reproduction includes not only production of human beings and their socialisation when young, but their maintenance throughout their life, it was felt that the differing requirements of reproduction within different social formations (and in different his-

torical periods) would produce varying responses to economic changes imposed by the transition to capitalism.

How to define the relations arising from differing forms of capital intervention provided a heated debate. Some participants felt that the use of the term non-capitalist relations of production ignored the existence of a world system; given that the circuits of exchange in the periphery are dominated by capital, all relations must be capitalist. Others suggested that, at the level of abstraction represented by the concept 'mode of production', pre-capitalist modes of production or significant remnants of them can be discerned. More concretely, Third World social formations are capitalist because their reproduction is subsumed within the extended reproduction of capital. They thus argued for use of the term non-capitalist relations to allow for greater specification of the interaction of capital on prior relations of production. The debate reached no satisfactory conclusion, but in practice throughout the Conference the distinction was relied on to specify differences in forms of incorporation.

Beneria² made the point that in much of the Third World it is difficult to distinguish between women's productive and reproductive activities. Domestic tasks are an integrated whole, centring on physical reproduction and other aspects of the reproduction of the work force, and the production of use values. Women's activities outside the household are conditioned by the extent to which they are compatible with women's household tasks, their class position, and gender and age hierarchies within the society. She also argued that the nature of women's production, like that of household production, is best analysed within a framework which includes economic processes within society as a whole and particularly the transformation of such processes.

Beneria stressed that women's roles in agricultural production depend upon the character of *agrarian structures*, including the nature of land-holding and class formation. These structures are inevitably affected by the intervention of capital and changes in them can have a marked effect upon the sexual division of labour: for example, proletarianisation and/or male migration. The process of economic growth and accumulation leads to differing levels of development of the labour market and this in turn creates regional and country differences in the roles of women remaining in

² *Reproduction, Production and the Sexual Division of Labour* by Lourdes Beneria.

the rural sector. Again, the shift to production for the market may have an erosive effect upon women's capacity to go on producing subsistence, even ultimately dispossessing her of access to land.

The main point to come out of the discussion of Beneria's paper was that while the primacy of reproductive activities over productive activities in determining women's roles was not in dispute, a real difficulty exists in conceptualising the difference between them under various relations of production.

Bennholdt-Thomsen's³ paper elucidates this problem well, particularly as she argues that analytical parallels should be made between women's work within metropolitan households and peasant production in the periphery. She starts from the position of the worldwide dominance of the capitalist mode of production and argues that a crucial distinction should be made between *extended reproduction*—the accumulation of value by capital, which reproduces and expands the capitalist mode of production; and *subsistence reproduction*—the reproduction of human life and its transformation into socialised labour. The subordination of subsistence reproduction to capital she considers to be equivalent to the subordination of small peasants' subsistence production within extended reproduction.

Women's domestic labour is analogous to peasant subsistence production in that both produce for consumption under conditions of generalised commodity production and bear the same relation to extended reproduction. In both cases too, subsistence production is unpaid work—"the exact definition of surplus-labour"—and subordinated ideologically to legitimate such exploitation: e.g. the illusion of peasant independence and that of conjugal love.

The separation between subsistence reproduction and extended reproduction is produced by the capitalist mode of production itself: "In all modes of production prior to capitalism subsistence production is at the same time social production and vice versa". In Marxist theory the relationship between the two types of reproduction has been ignored, in part because subsistence reproduction was expected to disappear with the full development of capitalism, in the same way that peasants' subsistence production was expected to vanish. However, both are in fact being reinforced, not as some aberrant 'survival' but because of capital's need for a reserve army of labour.

In the discussion of this paper, considerable doubt was expressed about the usefulness of equating domestic labour and peasant production within the term subsistence reproduction. In developed countries domestic labour stretches wages by transforming commodities into use values; in peasant economies, subsistence production produces its own use values. Are the methods of appropriation of value the same? Is the use of the term surplus value correct? More importantly, does such an analysis contribute to our understanding of the feminist issues concerning domestic labour, such as why it is done by women, and what its relation to the family in its various class forms is, and what the gender hierarchies established within it are?

Although Bennholdt-Thomsen's argument ran counter to the general trend of the conference, many of the problems it raised were discussed in other papers: e.g. what is the nature of peasant production subordinated to capital? How do we specify gender in household relations of production? Are there social relations of gender specific to the capitalist mode of production?

Conti's⁴ paper argues that capital accumulation is made possible not only through exploitation of wage labour and mechanisms whereby surplus labour is converted into surplus value, but also by what she calls a third element—the cheap reproduction of labour power by women within non-capitalist sectors of the periphery. While male labour is semi-proletarianised (through temporary migration or part-time production of export crops), female labour is concentrated in subsistence production, and production of human beings.

The analysis by Mbilinyi and Bryceson⁵ of pre-capitalist social relations brought an added dimension to the debate. They found that in pre-colonial Tanzania, the sexual division of labour was a precondition of the generation, appropriation and distribution of surplus. Control and coordination of women's labour, of the means of production, and of distribution, were the necessary bases for the development of patrilineal kingdoms able to extract a tribute from their hinterlands.

Although conclusions were not reached, participants in the discussions agreed upon the importance of developing adequate conceptual tools for analysing the ways in which women's labour is

³ *Subsistence Reproduction and General Reproduction* by Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen.

⁴ *Women and Capitalist Accumulation* by Anna Conti.

⁵ *From Peasants to Proletarians: the Changing Role of Women in Production* by Marjorie Mbilinyi and Deborah Bryceson.

integrated into that system of relations which reproduces a social formation in its totality. In particular the importance of specifying the various phases of the transition to capitalism was noted.

These points were reiterated in the second plenary paper⁶ which argued that theories of imperialism and of capital fail to specify the forms of decomposition of the sexual division of labour. They also ignore the effect of pre-existing forms of gender hierarchy (including the sexual division of labour) on the forms which relations of production take in the periphery, largely because such forms are seen as the result only of the organising force of capital.

Nor can the very different allocations of tasks by sex found in the peasant labour process be accounted for by the technical needs of specific crop production. However, the agents of capital may intervene directly to transform such allocations: here the classic example is development schemes which assume a male head of household and unpaid family labour and therefore contain concealed forms of coercion of women to subordinate themselves as unremunerated labourers to the male entrepreneur.

Stivens⁷ makes a different point in her detailed analysis of a rural area in Malaya. She argues that successive phases of capital accumulation have led to a strengthening of women's property rights in the rice and small-scale rubber producing sectors, as a result of the part played by these dominated sectors in reproducing capitalism. Nonetheless, while the processes of development appear to strengthen women's economic situation, this is true only for those women who remain bound to the village in the deteriorating rural sector.

Differences in women's participation under differing forms of agriculture in Central America was the subject of Arriagada's paper,⁸ which used statistical data from Guatemala and Costa Rica as illustration. In the discussion the usefulness of statistics to provide information on women's economic activities was questioned since it was felt that not only do they very frequently misrepresent women's actual economic activities, but that the category of economic itself was often discriminatory. This point was further elaborated by Deere⁹

who compared official census data suggesting that Andean women play a minimal role in agricultural production, with her own data which show that women account for some 21 per cent of the total labour input in peasant production. When cooking for fieldhands is included among agricultural tasks, this percentage rises to 39 per cent. A different but related point was made by Agarwal¹⁰ who criticises conventional economic accounting of female labour as being only 80 per cent as productive as that of male, and gives evidence to show that in some cases female labour is as productive as male labour, and in others more so.

In the discussion of these papers the question of the nature of household production continually cropped up. Participants, in comparing their own findings on changing relations within the family once it begins to produce labour or crops for the market, raised the question of how to theorise relationships within the family. The third plenary paper¹¹ addressed these issues directly in its attempt to refine the concept of the household and to specify gender hierarchy within it.

Within households two forms of hierarchy were distinguished: that which allows certain household members to command directly the labour of others—this is related to the ideology of the collective interest of household members—and that contained within the 'conjugal contract': the normative terms on which husbands and wives exchange labour or the products of their labour as goods or cash. It was argued these sets of exchanges are based on hierarchies of power, which have the effect of making the activities of men and women non-comparable and ensuring that the goods and services exchanged do not have an objective, quantifiable character, but the qualitative characteristic of being associated with specific social positions. Thus the household can be seen to be the focus of men's power to define the product of women's labour, or their labour itself, as ideologically inferior, and ensuring that exchange between husband and wife, or men and women, can never appear to be equal.

The discussion centred on the conventional notion that households have collective interests which are adequately represented by the head of the household, generally male. Some participants argued that hierarchy is not necessarily present, and that relations can be characterised as complementary.

⁶ *Intervention of Capital in Rural Production Systems: Part 1* by Pepe Roberts.

⁷ *Women and their Land: Changing Property Relations among rural Malays in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia* by Malla Stivens.

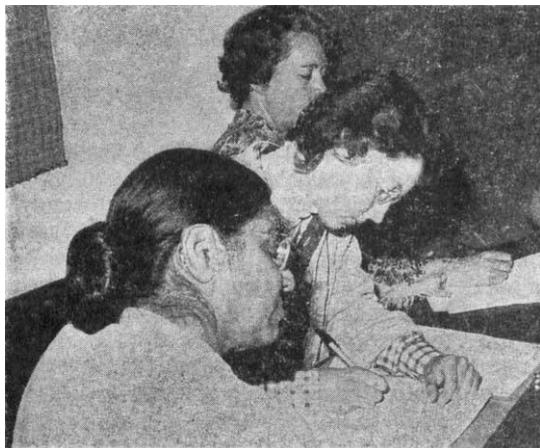
⁸ *Some Notes on Women's Work in Rural Areas* by Irma Arriagada.

⁹ *The Agricultural Division of Labour by Sex: a study of the Northern Peruvian Sierra* by Carmen Diana Deere.

¹⁰ *Some notes on Male and Female Labour Productivities* by Bina Agarwal.

¹¹ *Intervention of Capital in Rural Production Systems, Part II* by Ann Whitehead.

Others suggested that the model of dualism or complementarity misrepresents the social relations of gender within the household and is the result of the failure to analyse the nature of intra-household relations of exchange and distribution. Arguments which stress natural (i.e. biological) difference were discounted as being products of ideology and thus barriers to critical analysis.



Some of these points were further underlined by Maher¹² in her analysis of household consumption. Her data from Morocco demonstrate how women and young children are socialised to accept lower consumption patterns than men. Urban women are not permitted access to cash, while their husbands both spend their cash earnings on personal consumption goods and appropriate greater quantities of items produced in the household, such as food. (Men always have first rights to food, women and children being trained to decline it and to fast more often.) That this consumption pattern is not related to the quantity of labour performed but to social position, is also shown by men's greater right to uninterrupted sleep than women.

Dualist notions which ignore gender hierarchy are criticised in Roberts' paper¹³ on *Animation Féminine* Programmes in Niger. In the research upon which these programmes are based, an inventory of sex-specific tasks was made in order to pinpoint areas of women's economic control which could then be strengthened by direct intervention. The extent to which men control women's labour was not examined, nor was evidence that this control increases when households lose male labour

through migration, and when agricultural development programmes intensify production. As a result the areas highlighted by the programmes are in fact as subject to patriarchal authority as is women's direct labour for the household.

A common theme running through the discussion of the papers on the intervention of capital in rural production systems was the creation of a relative surplus population. In the workshop session devoted to this topic, and to migration and urbanisation, the processes which encourage certain forms of migration to urban areas were examined, as were the ways in which women and their families are inserted into the urban economy.

Mbilinyi and Bryceson¹⁴ in their paper analysed the changes in the economy which led to the peasant sector being unable to reproduce labour with the means of production at its disposal and to an increasing latent surplus population. By the 1950s much of this population was attracted to the urban areas, in part by higher wage rates (twice that of rural wages). Initially males were the primary migrants, but after family wage legislation was brought in married women migrated; by the 1970s however, migration of single women was increasingly reported (33 per cent of all female migrants in 1971). For young girls with some education, urban life presents an attractive alternative to their subordinate roles in village life. However, with sexual discrimination widespread, job opportunities are limited and female unemployment is higher than that of males. Despite this, Bryceson and Mbilinyi found that urban women were increasingly questioning the benefits of marriage: most women in full-time waged employment had non-contractual relationships with men, and relied on extended family ties for childcare during working hours.

In contrast Mozambican female migrants are characterised by a *lack* of independence:¹⁵ they either migrate with someone (usually father or husband) or are absorbed into a relative's household. Yugoslav women migrants to Western Europe¹⁶ again often migrate independently, sometimes even as the precursors to their menfolk. Despite the large number of female migrants in Europe (two-fifths of all migrants) they are almost entirely neglected in the migration literature. Their participation in the migrant labour force is around 30 per cent (in industry and services) but they are uniformly found in the lowest paid jobs

¹² *Consumption, Authority and Work in Morocco* by Vanessa Maher.

¹³ *Some Erroneous Assumptions about Rural Production Systems held by Development Planners* by Pepe Roberts. A revised version of this paper is to be found on p. 60.

¹⁴ *From Peasants to Proletarians*, see footnote 5.

¹⁵ *Women in the Urban Economy* by Ong Bie Nio.

¹⁶ *Migration of Women in Europe* by Mirjana Morokvasic.

and often have to take on two or three jobs to supplement their low wages. Morokvasic concludes that though migration frees young women from the restrictive ties and subordinate roles of their society, this freedom is bought at the high cost of overwork, ill health and lack of social esteem.

Wills Franco¹⁷ looked at different ways Colombian families are inserted into the urban labour force, and related this to women's position in the family and fertility behaviour. Where men are under-employed families tend to be large and the incidence of the extended family statistically significant. Marriages are unstable and generally serial; contraception is disliked, in part because of the economic utility of children but also because of the cultural value placed on *machismo*. In contrast in the industrial sector where men are more or less permanently employed, not only are higher levels of welfare and housing found, but children have higher levels of education. Families are typically much smaller, birth control is welcomed, and marriage is generally more stable and undertaken at a later age. Women rarely go out to work and greater value is placed on women's role within the home.

In the discussion of these papers it was agreed that migration should be analysed not in terms of

individual motivations but rather in terms of the forces operating to create a relative surplus population. However, what the crucial factors are which affect the sex and age composition of the migratory flow was hotly disputed. One participant for example, strongly challenged the primacy of labour demand at the receiving end as an explanation of sex-specific flows, and suggested that forms of gender subordination in the labour process in the area of origin must be taken into account. Factors such as the forms of land-ownership (private or communal), and household relations of production (forms of marriage, age and sex hierarchies) condition the character of labour supplied to the capitalist sector. It was felt that an approach which tried to specify what the conditions of social reproduction in the rural areas are might lead to a clearer understanding of the factors leading to differences in composition of migratory flows. Several participants made the point that such an enterprise is impossible without new data on female migration since it is consistently underestimated, particularly in Africa and possibly in Asia as well.

¹⁷ *Family Structure and Productive Systems* by Margarita Wills Franco.