Gendered Tensions in Rural Livelihoods and Development Interventions

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This issue of *Feminist Africa* revisits rural women and agricultural livelihoods, focusing on the persistence of contexts that compromise their ability to benefit from development interventions. An accumulation of studies over the years have set out to unravel the hindering factors. Some such studies, premised on the economic efficiency argument, push for greater attention to women's productivity in rural agriculture. These studies note that women's enhanced productivity could increase agricultural output and end poverty, hunger, and malnutrition in rural communities (Agarwal, 2011; Kelkar, 2013; Kumase et al., 2010). In response, interventions have been designed to benefit women, reaching them directly as individuals or in groups. Others have used women as agents to introduce high-yielding crops and animal breed varieties. Some interventions target resource access, while others deal with environmental challenges in weather, soil, and water content. Yet more of these interventions are devoted to providing agricultural communities with alternative livelihoods to end rural poverty. Such projects have increased over the years as different institutions attempt to resolve the perceived challenges in agricultural production, especially in the follow-up to the liberalisation of public service delivery as part of structural adjustment policies (Tsikata and Torvikey, 2021; Kelkar, 2013; Doss and Morris, 2001).

Following the failure of interventions to deliver according to expectations, subsequent research attention turned to understanding the differential outcomes for women engaged in rural agricultural projects (Doss and Morris, 2001; Padmanabhan, 2004; Tsikata and Torvikey, 2021). The earliest studies focused on the gendered impact of agricultural technology, especially the negative effect on rural women's productive and reproductive labour. Such research to account for the situation noted that gendered access to resources caused women's failure to benefit from agricultural interventions (Agarwal, 2011; Doss and Morris,

2001). The direct culprits identified were literacy skills to read and write in the language of innovations, time use burdens, independence to decide land use, and control over labour, either their own or others (Zakaria et al., 2015). The requirements for adopting new crop and animal breed varieties affect gender orders because they introduce new demands on skills, time, or resource use by participating farmers. Britwum and Akorsu (2016) contend that factors affecting land access, especially land size and tenancy arrangements, are critical to adopting interventions. Women's ability to control their earnings and the opportunities offered by innovations to assist them in performing their gender roles are the factors that account for their ability to participate in agricultural interventions (Britwum and Akorsu, 2016; Okali, 2012).

Because intervention uptake is closely related to women's status, most studies blame patriarchal norms and values as the main constraining force – a situation that makes rural women's resource constraints the most glaring form of patriarchy. Patriarchal traditions in all social institutions entrench women's subordination, thus becoming relevant to agrarian livelihoods. This connection to patriarchal norms and values enables gendered constructions around production relations to flourish within rural communities and to support other forms of discrimination. Many studies trace the basis of the patriarchal system from the conception of farmers as male along with the notion of the trickle-down effect, which assumes that accumulated benefits to household heads will reach all members equally. Patriarchy thrives through the invisibilisation of women's labour, riding on beliefs that materially and symbolically undervalue women's labour (Apusigah, 2009; Mitra and Rao, 2016). This situation leads observers to note that agricultural interventions are gendered to the extent that they uphold systems that entrench patriarchy (Padmanabhan, 2004). The conclusions point out that approaches with significant potential for uptake strengthen women's productive resource access by packaging the inputs into divisible or small-sized technologies and targeting women in groups to achieve economies of scale. Those that present inputs as integrated and not in single disparate units also have high levels of uptake (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2010). Women might be unable to adopt innovations because the latter carry the barriers that structure women's production status in agriculture. Women's supposed preference for traditional agricultural practices and inputs might be a safety measure to circumvent the

constraints they face in acquiring the additional land, labour, and finance that innovations demand.

Mitra and Rao (2016) note that current trends critical to gendered production relations in agriculture are the rise of corporate or contract farming, avenues for non-farm livelihood diversification, and casualisation of agricultural labour. They made this observation in their work analysing critical literature on family farms in the Asia-Pacific region to discern how gender relations have been affected by emerging agrarian structures, state policies, and market forces. Despite the multiplicity of contexts covered in the region, we find useful lessons to apply in African situations in terms of the prominence of women's labour on family farms, the tenuous connection between women's production and their reproductive roles, and the value placed on women's labour. Tsikata and Torvikey (2021) note that as national economies increase their levels of liberalised corporate agriculture, land use gets increasingly diversified and land markets intensify. The impact of corporate farming on women is generally presented in the literature as mixed, with some suggesting increased cash earnings for rural households and the possibility of autonomous incomes for women. However, there seems to be more agreement about the impact of corporate farming and large-scale land acquisition as narrowing existing customary routes for women to acquire land, further marginalising women's productive labour (Mitra and Rao, 2016; Tsikata and Torvikey, 2021).

Women are not a homogenous group, even as gendered beings. Here we are reminded of the question of the diversity amongst rural women, which mediates patriarchal conditions to circumscribe their productive and reproductive roles. Later studies acknowledging discrepancies in the impact of interventions experienced by various categories of women focused on the additional socio-economic conditions of women which mediate impact. Gender modifiers identified include class, ethnicity, maternity, marital status, and age (Mitra and Rao, 2016; Yaro, 2009; Adolwine and Dudima, 2010). Age as a gender modifier operates in tandem with life cycle changes, particularly around women's childbearing and marital status. In subsistence agriculture, where the distinctions between domestic and productive work are tenuous, women's life-cycle changes become closely associated with their access to productive resources as such changes are tied to their household provisioning roles. The age

of women, their household status, either daughter or mother, daughter-in-law or mother-in-law, count in terms of the opportunities around resource use and how their households finally benefit from interventions.

Beyond the gendered dimensions of innovation uptake, studies have tried to understand how women who successfully access development interventions are motivated to adopt and adapt available innovations. According to Britwum and Akorsu (2016), female provisioning, especially via their roles within marriage, informed women's participation in agricultural interventions. Though farm households are not a unitary whole and members have different needs, obligations, and rights, Mitra and Rao (2016) note that households in Asia exhibit both shared interests and conflicts in the performance of household tasks due to the interconnectedness of roles required for the survival of the household as a unit and its members as individuals. Thus, women must negotiate conjugal and familial relations as they adopt new technologies and adapt to altering tenure regimes. Such negotiations often affect gender orders. The type of intervention shapes its gender-altering potential; for example, livestock rearing is noted to shore up women's income, allowing them to access additional resources to expand avenues for altering gender orders in household provisioning (Mitra and Rao, 2016).

Studies also step beyond the direct benefits of interventions to examine women's responses to livelihood changes, especially concerning non-farm diversification strategies. They wonder how alternative employment strategies impact household income, women's status, and emerging gender relations. One observation from such studies is that agricultural labour is feminising. This process is captured through traditional economic indicators, such as higher levels of female participation in sections of the agricultural labour force or more significant involvement of women in market-oriented agricultural work. Another indicator of agriculture feminisation is where women's labour force participation increases in rural agriculture as men take up more non-farm activities in response to livelihood diversification (Mitra and Rao, 2016). The final form of feminisation identified in the literature is the expansion of female waged labour in commercial agriculture. Because women are considered to be easier to discipline with incredible ability to multitask, coupled with their lower need for cash income, feminisation tends to be accompanied by less

secure jobs. These often fall outside of ILO-defined decent jobs, thus having a higher propensity to be exploitative. Here mention is made of work forms seen as feminine because they remain unskilled and temporal without formal contracts (Mitra and Rao, 2016).

Raising some critical questions about what Mitra and Rao (2016) considered to be sweeping generalisations of agriculture feminisation, the authors advise that research should focus on exceptions to the rule, such as situations of higher levels of female out-migration or what they term 'masculinisation of agriculture' (Mitra and Rao, 2016: 67). Existing studies also question the source of agriculture feminisation, whether it is the general lack of state investment, low value placed on agriculture, or general lack of opportunities for women outside the agricultural sector. They suggest as a way out a number of modalities for understanding agriculture feminisation. The first is increased male employment in the non-farm sectors, leaving women to assume full responsibility on household farms. Well-placed households could benefit from remittances to hire labour to compensate for the male absence in farming. Feminisation can also occur when women take up commercial farming on household plots of land, even when men remain within the rural space. The pressure on women emerges from the need to spend long hours outside their homes as they market their agricultural produce. The most crucial consideration is that agriculture feminisation takes a form which is dependent on the nature of female productive labour that is engaged (*ibid*).

Even though rural agricultural production relations are situated within patriarchal relations, Doss (2002) observes that the ensuing gendered production relations respond to specific cultural, social, and economic contexts. She notes that, as a result, conceptual framing is essential for a critical unpacking of the specificities of the contexts. Following Boserup's seminal work highlighting distinctions between female and male farming systems, Young (1993) extended our conceptual tools by pointing to the fact that agricultural production is segregated around tasks and products. She elaborated further that the segregation around farm tasks can also be sequential. Thus, even around so-called male agriculture products, women's labour is needed, occurring with and in between male tasks. Apusigah (2009) also explains that the limited land access granted to women is derived from the cultural construction of their labour within farm

households. Some cultures view women as farmhands, while others perceive their status as farmers only in relation to male household members.

For Young, we need to proceed with our research into rural agricultural production relations from a deeper understanding of how femininity and masculinity are constructed around particular farm tasks and products. Such analytical debates are essential for understanding alterations around cropping patterns and husbandry practices in rural communities. Padmanabhan (2004) explains that the gender orders around agricultural production shift in response to modifications in provisioning roles as the agrarian contexts make concessions for women or men to transgress known gender orders to ensure household well-being. Studies have, therefore, been interested in how interventions affect women's status, what Padmanabhan (2004) calls staple replacing varieties that have the potential to shift gender restrictions around agricultural resources. Instances of how interventions have allowed women to bypass male household heads' control over maize in northern Ghana have been highlighted (Padmanabhan, 2004). Thus, for Doss (2002), our focus when exploring agrarian livelihoods should be on how gender relations play out in agricultural production relations and the emerging gender orders that become necessary to support them.

Given that change is inherent in agricultural enterprises, some authors ask that while paying attention to gender relations and rural livelihoods, researchers should consider changes in household structures and production relations. They demand new lenses to unravel the role that gender relations play in alterations in the choice of agricultural products and the vexed questions of access to productive resources (Mitra and Rao, 2016). They ask that the new lenses should capture gendered relations within agrarian livelihoods through individual and community trend studies. They also believe that understanding women's strategies for household maintenance is just as critical as their ability to resist patriarchy. However, they contend that gender roles should feature in the design and implementation of projects that seek to bring new technologies or farm practices to rural communities (Meinzen-Dick, et al., 2010).

The feature articles in this issue focus on rural interventions that purport to improve the lives of agrarian workers in rural Africa. Taking a cue from

Mitra and Rao (2016), who caution against the singular focus on the impact of interventions on women's labour burdens, we agree that just focusing on the manifestations of women's participation in agricultural interventions will ignore the underlying political economy of rural spaces and how women are integrated into capitalist structures for surplus extraction. New framings are necessary to avoid erasing other forms of extraction that depend on women's productive or reproductive labour. The feature articles examine two main intervention processes: land tenure and agricultural inputs. The two articles on land focus on tenure forms arising from large-scale land acquisition for commercial farming and for post-apartheid land redistribution. The other two features are on inputs and consider the introduction of livestock breeds targeting women and the theoretical framing of interventions. Examining women and agrarian livelihood interventions with different lenses brings to the fore the new issues that help to devise more transformative strategies.

Natacha Bruna addresses how rural women's productive and reproductive labour are incorporated into the capitalist economy. She does this by examining large-scale land acquisition in post-independence Mozambique, focusing on women's direct relations with commercial agriculture as household heads or indirect relations as members of households headed by men. In the latter case, the men are of varying social and economic statuses, due to the size of their land holdings and ownership patterns. Bruna outlines the differentiated outcomes of compensation mechanisms adopted by the commercial entity Portucel Mozambique, by drawing on Shivji's explanation of capitalist processes of surplus extraction from rural workers. Bruna clarifies how different categories of women subsidise the surplus extraction by Portucel through the differential land tenure conditions. Relying on Nancy Fraser's discussions on social reproduction to explain how women's reproductive labour is exploited, Bruna notes that land acquisition for plantation agriculture in Mozambique rides on female labour, irrespective of the employment status and income levels of household heads. Thus, the emerging work forms, whether waged labour, permanent, temporal or peasant farming, do not preclude female labour from subsidising capital. However, pre-existing social hierarchies modify how households are incorporated into the production relations around Portucel plantation

agriculture. Differences in household land holdings determined the levels of peasantisation of women; for men, it was the process of proletarianization.

In the second feature article, Petronella Munemo, Joseph Manzvera and Innocent Agbelie try to unravel the benefits that women derived from Zimbabwe's Fast Track Land Reform Policy. They adopt the feminist political ecology approach to understand how women's everyday experiences shape their identities as gendered subjects and how the social orders around reproduction and production are manifested and challenged. Their work, based on a review of existing literature on the subject, shows that women's benefits from the land redistribution programme, although limited, surpassed those of previous land reform policies. The authors conclude that women's participation and contribution to land invasions in Zimbabwe provided them avenues to acquire and own land.

The findings of Bruna as well as those of Munemo, Manzvera and Agbelie, draw attention to how women who are free from marital bonds can access land outside customary holdings. Under customary holdings, it is women's connection to men that provides them access to land. Women without marital ties appear to stand a better chance to access land under systems governed by statutory instruments. Thus, whereas marital status gives access to communally held lands, statutory access seems to work better for women with little or no ties to men through marriage. This finding needs further interrogation.

Gendered divisions in agricultural tasks revolve around food staples and livestock. Agricultural interventions, especially those that carry new technologies, are directed towards shifting products from those meant for consumption to petty commodities. They carry demands for new inputs such as seeds, fertilisers, and agrochemicals like pesticides and weedicides. The accompanying inputs are also gendered in terms of the new labour forms required and those that disappear or intensify with intervention uptake. More importantly, there are the symbolic meanings attached to agricultural products, inputs, and tasks. Studies note that all of these are affected and, in turn, affect gendered access to productive resources, household provisioning and reproductive labour (Mitra and Rao, 2016; Rao, 2016; Quisumbing et al., 1995; Bryceson, 1995). Using interventions around livestock, Patricia Aboe, Akua

Britwum, and Ernest Okorley note how gendered institutional rules and norms shape women's adoption of technologies concerning small ruminant husbandry. Introducing small ruminants to women broke the norms establishing male household heads as the automatic beneficiary of development interventions, whilst increasing women's livestock asset base. Other norms broken were women taking up more husbandry practices, such as providing health care for small ruminants. However, critical male roles remained intact; thus, men retained control over the sale of small ruminants. Men also set the rules on community-level ruminant husbandry practices and ensured adherence to these rules. Although women made some intrusions into small ruminant husbandry, the alterations in gender roles around the husbandry practices were insufficient to break the male monopoly over small ruminant ownership and marketing.

Since interventions extend existing patriarchal barriers to resource use, the demand for conscious gender targeting programmes as a solution has been pursued over decades. Agricultural interventions that address women's constrained access, observers have cautioned, should not reinforce existing gender orders (Mitra and Rao, 2016). In this issue, Loretta Baidoo pursues the viability of women-targeted interventions. She notes that how interventions are framed and how the are goals set out, are critical for altering women's status in agricultural households. Baidoo draws on radical feminist analytical tools to examine how interventions that have tackled the non-transformative shortcomings in liberal feminist approaches still fail to realise their intended outcomes. Drawing on her experience with two interventions targeting rural women's livelihoods, Baidoo sets out to unravel, through an autoethnographic account, the viability of development interventions to challenge patriarchal gender orders and address other discriminatory social hierarchies differentiating women's lived experiences. To do this, she combines gender analytical frameworks from three sources: Moser's gender needs assessment, social relations approach, and Sara Longwe's women empowerment frameworks.

The selected analytical tools were applied to assess the interventions in the planning, implementation and outcomes. Baidoo's interest was to determine the agentic opportunities that development interventions provide women. She also analysed the gender sensitivity of the interventions and drew on Sara Longwe's empowerment framework to analyse the practical deployment of empowerment

in the selected interventions. Baidoo notes that interventions can only be gender transformative when women are involved in all stages of the project cycle and make essential inputs. The project which allowed women to participate in the process seeking to promote women's access to productive resources, also sensitised women in field schools and community activities. Because women were given opportunities to be actively involved in the project cycle, they showed greater confidence and agency during the project implementation. The second project, which addressed women only in terms of needing credit, could not develop women's sense of confidence.

Faustina Obeng Adomaa's Standpoint also discusses recurring poverty among rural women despite decades of development interventions. She blames the standards set by these interventions, which she calls 'the low hanging fruits', as the cause of their failure to break the barriers that women face in accessing farm and non-farm livelihood resources. Adomaa explains that the failure to address differences among women constrains their access and only ends up entrenching disadvantages in rural communities. Therefore, the framing of development interventions matters not only for addressing patriarchal discrimination but other forms of hierarchy as well.

The two conversation pieces present activist experiences within a community-based system and within larger institutional structures. In the first case, Fati Abigail Abdulai, the director of the Widows and Orphans Movement (WOM) in Ghana, shares her experience organising at-risk women, widows and orphans in patrilineal Ghana. Her work reveals the challenges in using legislation to protect women's interests in agricultural resources, particularly land. The patriarchal system that supports women's differential access to resources also stands in their way and prevents them from using protective legislation to promote their interests. Women's literacy, economic status, and time use burdens prevent them from using existing legislation to protect their access to resources, especially those acquired together with their husbands, which should divulge to them through the law on intestate succession in Ghana. In a situation where women's productive activities in subsistence production are tied to their marital obligations, inheritance rights are critical to the well-being and economic survival of widows and their orphaned children. In this context, the work of WOM becomes a crucial part of sustaining the conditions of women

in rural agriculture. A grassroots-based organisation like WOM discovers that the traditional institutional setting matters and that building alliances with traditional leaders can allow inroads for addressing customary rules of granting women land in patrilineal communities. Abdulai's experience in WOM highlights the limits of activism devoted to providing relief to women. In the long run, the achievements of NGOs are undermined by institutional failures outside their control. Thus, assisting women to gain control over their dead husbands' property does not provide solutions to intergenerational poverty.

The daughters of widows cannot break the poverty cycle without reproductive health facilities to avoid teen pregnancies that cut short their formal educational opportunities. *Feminist Africa* draws on lessons from an Asian country with regard to activism addressing institutional structures, especially the UN and state-sponsored interventions. Rizwana Waraich of Pakistan, a board member of the NGO Lok Sanjh Foundation, shares her experiences. As she explains, her task is to ensure that state institutions live up to their international commitments to gender equality and women's rights. Waraich's tasks include sensitising male departmental heads about the need for gender mainstreaming. Affirmative action provisions have increased women's presence in public office and politics; however, patriarchy still enables men to push back against women's autonomy in several ways. Waraich's experience in Pakistan and Abdulai's in Ghana, show the limits of legal reform in dealing with systemic structures that promote patriarchy.

This issue of *Feminist Africa* responds to an earlier one, *Feminist Africa* 12, on 'Land, Labour and Gendered Livelihoods', which encouraged the application of alternative conceptual tools for examining gendered rural livelihood insecurities. The application of such conceptual tools highlights policy inadequacies and pushes the debate towards re-evaluating development practices and intentions under neo-liberalism. It is clear, however, that development as practised, will not address the persistent inequalities produced by capitalism and its modification of patriarchy. This awareness then emphasises the need for feminist scholarship and activism to confront the question of alternative frameworks for pursuing a transformative agenda.

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