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Gendered Work Patterns in the Endangered Sahelian Rural Environment: Exploring Three Layers of Exploitation

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Résumé: Le croisement du genre et de la classe dans l'explication des formes d'exploitation du travail de l'homme ou de la femme est valable, certes, mais d'autres facteurs au niveau des espaces géographique et social, tels que la classe, la race, l'affiliation politique, la croyance, l'éducation, l'âge et la situation régionale, ainsi que différentes formes de vulnérabilités — conflits, environnement, etc. — agissent et influent de manière fort complexe sur la vie d'hommes et de femmes. Le présent article explore les effets spécifiques et interactifs de ces facteurs dans la définition du caractère exploiteur de la division du travail, en se servant de l'environnement rural africain comme étude de cas. L'article va au-delà de la conceptualisation conventionnelle et descriptive du double travail journalier/de la double exploitation journalière des formes de travail, féminine et masculine, respectivement.

Introduction

One of the most cited conceptualisations in gender analysis is the so-called 'double-oppression' of women. It is argued that gender and class are intertwined and hence the core relations defining women's lives are capitalism and patriarchy (Bennet 1995). Women are exploited first on the basis of their class position and secondly on the basis of their gender. More extreme analysis of this position regard patriarchy as nothing else but 'capitalist patriarchy' (Mies 1986a). Deriving from this line of analysis, it is also argued that in the gender division of labour, women work a 'double day', categorised generally as reproductive (domestic work) and productive work (agricultural, market, wage employment etc.). The distinction between productive and reproductive work is however no longer tenable and we shall raise questions regarding its validity in a later

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section of this paper. By working a 'double day', women are exploited not only in terms of working longer hours than men but also lesser or no access to resources. The gendered pattern of work and access to resources 'is an illustration of the asymmetry of obligations and reciprocities between women and men' (Palmer 1994). Several studies have also shown gendered wage differentials and gendered rights to collective bargaining all in favour of men (Bennet 1995:76). Pulling all these strands together and further, Bennett (1995) contends that gender and class also intersect in the exploitation process because 'the woman's role as manager of social reproduction is more difficult under conditions of poverty'. While Bennett's use of the role concept is problematic because it reinforces the existing patriarchal ideology of gendered division of labour, what remains central and integral to our paper, however, is the fact that poverty exacerbates the working conditions of both women and men in general and those of women in particular.

The Problem

Although the intersection of gender and class in the explanation of exploitative gendered work patterns is valid, it is now realised that there are many more factors all acting in a complex network of simultaneity to define the lives of women and men (the gender division of labour inclusive). These factors are located both in the social and geographic spaces and they include, among others, class, race, ethnicity, political affiliation, creed, education, age, regional location (in national and global hierarchies of power), and various forms of vulnerability – civil and military conflicts, environmental collapse and so on. These factors cannot certainly be explained away by a resort to a real or imaginary all powerful, all encompassing variable called *class* or by simply dismissing patriarchy as an expression of capitalism.[1] In addition, none of these factors can be analytically treated as mutually exclusive categories. One must consider

[1] The explanatory power of class has been a subject of debate in the literature. However, what is becoming increasingly clear is to consider the simultaneity of several factors in explaining the subordination of women, since 'analytically... the subordination of women did not seem to be in any sense coterminous with capitalism' (Stichter, S. B; and Parpart J. L. (1990) (eds.).

their specificities on the one hand and their interactive outcomes on the other.

This paper attempts to explore the specific and interactive effects of three of these factors in defining both the pattern and exploitative character of the gender division of labour. Using the endangered rural environment of the African Sahel as a case study, the paper 'peels' the following three layers of exploitation veiling our understanding of the social and economic conditions of women in the region:

(i) Patriarchy and class

(ii) Rural poverty

(iii) The Sahelian environmental crisis

The paper is a theoretical attempt at conceptualising the specific character and effects of gendered work patterns in a region which is largely rural and environmentally endangered. The conceptualisation is based on the general environment feature of the Sahel and specific details relating to local economic, cultural or political variations are beyond the scope of this paper and may only be revealed by local-specific empirical studies. This paper is simply an attempt at transcending the descriptive double-day work/double-day exploitation conceptualisation which is traditionally rooted in the literature.

The Sahel: Dimensions of Environmental Crisis

We begin by taking a brief look at the nature, scope and consequences of the environmental crisis in the Sahel with a view to contextualising our study. The Sahel region of Africa covers the semi-arid area to the south of the Sahara. Indeed the word 'Sahel' means 'desert edge'. Generally, the countries classified as Sahelian are nine in number. They include, Burkina Faso, Chad, Ethiopia, Mali, Mauritania, Senegal, Somalia, Niger and Sudan. Further classifications are also made: Western Sahelian region covers Senegal, Mauritania, Mali and Niger. Central Sahelian region includes Burkina Faso, Chad, Sudan; and Eastern Sahelian region includes Ethiopia, Somalia and some add Djibouti (United Nations 1987). All of

the Sahelian countries have rural agricultural populations. See Table 1 for the *Urban and Rural Population of Eight Sahelian Countries.*

Table 1: Urban and Rural Population for Eight Sahelian Countries * 1950-2020

Year	Total (000)	Urban (000)	Urban as % of Total	Rural (000)	Rural as % of Total
1950	46,090	3,180	6.9	42,910	93.1
1960	55,740	5,150	9.2	50,590	90.8
1970	69,690	8,720	12.5	60,960	87.5
1980	89,860	14,190	15.8	75,670	84.2
1990	17,600	22,530	19.2	95,040	80.8
2000	156,140	37,420	24.0	118,700	76.0
2010	205,120	62,420	30.4	142,680	69.6
2020	258,280	97,370	37.7	160,700	62.2

Source: Adapted from IUCN Sahel Programme *Population in the Sahel* Paper No. 13, December 1989, p. 5.

(*) The eight Sahel countries covered are Ethiopia, Chad, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Somalia, Sudan and Senegal.

The basis upon which these counties are classified as Sahelian is the very pronounced climatic anomaly. In most of these countries, the amount of rainfall is less than 200-300 mm per annum and this is far below the African average of 740 mm (Salau 1992). Within the countries geographically designated as Sahelian and other regions with very similar climatic conditions like Northern Nigeria, Cape Verde, Guinea Bisau and so on, the major environmental crisis is drought and desertification. It must, however, be noted that:

> Drought is an ever present threat to much of Africa as it is the driest continent having over 45 per cent of the world's desert area. Over 50 per cent of its land area is either covered by the hottest land or is desertification prone by drought and other factors. Overall Africa has not only a meagre amount of total annual rainfall but about two-thirds of its area receives more than half its annual rainfall in just three months (Salau 1992).

This deficit in rainfall has disastrous effects on agriculture and pastoralism in the whole of Africa and the Sahelian region in particular. As much as twenty per cent of the total population of West Africa is pastoral (Sihm 1989). In addition, desertification in the Sahel has led to a severe depletion of forest resources. And while there is no automatic link between drought and famine[2] there is evidence to suggest that the African Sahel has been the region worst hit by acute food shortages and its disastrous consequences. For example, the Sahelian drought of 1968-1973 led to deaths estimated at 100,000 people with an additional loss of 12 million cattle which is about 40 per cent of the total. All these inevitably led to the migration of the peasant farmers and pastoralists on a very large scale with resultant displacement of human populations and destruction of the vegetative cover (Grantz 1980:75-97). In the last fifty years alone, desertification has affected about 650,000 km of arable and grazing land

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[2] Shenton and Watts (1979) have argued in an article 'Capitalism and Hunger in Northern Nigeria' that food shortage resulting from drought and other natural problems 'were a regular, if not normal, feature of life in the Sahelio-Sudanic region of West Africa prior to its incorporation into the world capitalist system'. They argued that in Hausaland and in much of the Sahelio-Sudanic zone, there was an elaborate system of precaution and response to food shortage which was embedded in the social organisation of production and distribution. 'Capitalism and Hunger in Northern Nigeria' in *Review of African Political Economy*, No. 15/16, 1979, pp. 53-62.

on the southern margin of the Sahara with the desert boundaries extending westward into Senegal and eastward into Sudan at an annual average of five kilometres (Ji Bee 1985). And to conclude this section, we cannot but agree with Sai (1995) that 'trees are being cut down thirty times as fast as they are being replaced, and some eighty million Africans (majority of them in the Sahel) have difficulty finding firewood'. The Sahel environment is indeed endangered and given the gendered division of labour and unequal access to resources, extra strains and stresses are imposed on women much more than men.

Analytical Framework: Gender Division of Labour and Exploitation of Women

Analysis of the gender division of labour in African agriculture has passed through at least three conceptual phases: The first phase corresponding to pre-colonial Africa suffered 'from sexist and idealist biases' (Zeleza 1993). Referring to the models constructed by Terray (1975), Meillasoux (1978, 1981) and Dupre and Ray (1978), Zeleza argued that in those conceptualisations,

> women are reduced to 'goods' whose circulation is controlled by male elders... [and] by controlling young men's access to women and matrimonial commodities, such as cattle, the elders regulated both demographic reproduction and relations of production and exchange. These models are static and reduce women to 'objects' primarily acquired and exchanged to satisfy male productive and reproductive needs (Zeleza 1993).

In the post independence period, particularly in the 1970s when the United Nations started focusing attention on rural development, analysis of the gender division of labour in African agriculture shifted to documentin 'women's role in agriculture', 'women's role in economic development (Boserup 1970). Boserup attempted to demonstrate that women generale do not benefit from the development process; instead, it has led to the deterioration of their 'role' and status in relation to those of men. Boserup concludes that women's status is high where their involvement in production is high. This line of thinking provided a major break throug in conceptualising the gender division of labour. Boserup and others

following her sought to show that Africa was a 'female farming area'[3] given the extent of their labour contribution to agriculture: 'Statistics for the (African) region show that in nineteen countries, in spite of the under-recording of women's work, over 40 percent of the labour in agriculture is recorded as female' (Oppong 1987). However, such documentation of women's role generally failed to address structural issues pertaining to asymmetrical gender relations. It fails to ask why women must work longer hours than men; it simply calls for a 'recognition' of the role of women with the implicit or open recommendation that they should be encouraged to work harder! Writing for the International Labour Organisation (ILO), Dilic-First (1980) suggested that:

> Farm women are bearers of a threefold role. They carry out between 60 and 70 per cent of all farm work, and engaged in agricultural production for at least two-third of their normal working time. In addition, they do all the household work together with the majority of chores related to raising children. Yet, rural women appear to be an *underutilised* human resource. If given better technical and social training, they could make a *greater* contribution both to agricultural and rural development, as well as to the development of society in general (emphases mine).

It is therefore clear that the Boserupian era simply argued that policy makers should recognise women's 'role' and support them to perform those 'roles' better. It neither addresses the pattern nor the exploitative character of the gender division of labour in the rural areas. In the final analysis, the conception of rural women as 'the worker ants and termites without whose necessary works connected with cleaning up, nurturing and production, everything would be chaotic' (Obbo 1983) is justified and made an article of intellectual faith.

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[3] The argument that Africa is 'a female farming area', has come under severe criticism in the recent past. For example (Whitehead 1994) has argued that the blanket characterisation of sub-Saharan African farming systems as female, serves to homogenise what is an area of considerable cultural and economic variety and that 'female farming systems', like their male counterparts, are based on a complex inter-relation of men's and women's work. Whitehead, A., (1994) 'Wives and Mothers: Female Farmers in Africa', in Adepoju, A; and Oppong, C; (eds.) *Gender, Work and Population* in *Sub-Saharan Africa*, London, ILO/James Currey, pp. 35-53.

Following the 'feminisation of poverty', in the 1980s, the women in development approach of the 1970s shifted, if gradually, to gender and development. Analysis of the gender division of labour started focusing on oppressive gender relations. Mbilinyi (1994), writing in this context argues that the gender division of labour assigns women more work in production and reproduction within household and smallholder farming systems; creates gender segmentation in the labour market such that certain kinds of work are labelled men's work and others women's work. The exploitative character of the gender division of labour is further related to 'women's unequal access, ownership and control over resources' and 'patriarchal power relations which assign women a subordinate secondary status in relation to men in decision-making processes' (Mbilinyi 1994). This conceptualisation of gender division of labour grew out of the attempts to link patriarchy to capitalism. It is argued that women work a *double-day* of the home (reproductive) and productive work (agriculture, market, wage labour, etc.). Within the domestic domain of the household, women carry out a series of tasks which range from child-care to cooking. Such tasks are 'invisible' and are therefore unaccounted for in statistics and unpaid for; they are indeed not regarded as 'work'. Women must spend a 'second day', collecting firewood, fetching water, farming and so on. While the productive activities are regarded as work, the reward largely goes to men. On both fronts, women are exploited.

However, the distinction between productive and reproductive work has been contested in the literature. One particularly interesting argument against the distinction is that domestic labour functions to reduce the necessary part of the worker's labour time or its value to a level that is much lower than the actual subsistence level of the working class. The difference is therefore made up by the housewife's unpaid labour. In this way, domestic labour contributes to surplus value; it nourishes capitalism. Beyond this line of criticism, we must note that within the context of African rural societies, it is difficult to draw a sharp line between what is housework and what is not; what is agricultural work and what is not, indeed what is productive and what is not. Several so-called household based tasks such as child-care may be extended as a community responsibility. Food processing for consumption and sale takes place within the households and are not in any way restricted to the 'productive' farm or market.

According to Stamp (1989),

> A more rigorous, historically grounded understanding of gender relations therefore requires a clear conceptualisation of the African household and, in particular, the politics of space. A starting point is the recognition that African households have indefinite social boundaries.

They are often shifting, flexible structures in which the boundaries are difficult to clearly discern (Whitehead 1984a; Kandiyoti 1985).

Transcendence

We now move on to argue that the double day work/double exploitation conceptualisation of gender division of labour is not adequate to explain the depth and breadth of the gendered work patterns and exploitation of women in the Sahel. Transcending this conceptualisation requires an examination of both the general and *specific* aspects of the gender division of labour and the exploitation of women that goes with it. What is *general* (but not universal in form) to all women is the role of patriarchy and class in defining gendered work patterns and exploitation. What is *specific* (though not exceptional) to the Sahelian rural women is rural poverty and environmental crisis.

Patriarchy and Class

Patriarchy is perhaps the most discussed topic in gender analysis and yet it remains the most misunderstood. Literally, it 'means the rule of the father'. But today's male dominance goes beyond the rule of the fathers, it includes the rule of husbands, of male bosses, of ruling men in most societal institutions, in politics and economics' (Mies 1986a). Mies further argues that patriarchy as a concept expresses the totality and character of oppressive and exploitative relations which affect women. Its usefulness lies in the fact that it denotes 'the historical and societal dimensions of women's exploitation and oppression and is thus less open to biologistic interpretations'.

And the tendency for 'biologistic interpretations' is where the conceptual problem mainly lies. Some feminists viewed women's oppression in terms of male/female inequality in biological reproduction. For example, Mackintosh (1977), argued that 'the characteristic relation of

human reproduction is patriarchy, that is, the control of women, and especially of their sexuality and fertility by men'. This line of thinking held so much sway to the extent that initial attempts at reconceptualising it only ended in a confusing trap. Some attempted a marriage of the 'biological' and the 'social' to come up with the 'sex/gender system'. Engels (1884) had much earlier rejected the use of biology in explaining gender differences. He was of the view that the subordinate position of women can be traced to the historical transformation from communal to class society and the subsequent institutionalisation of private property. Male dominance was thus seen as something linked to capitalism and will disappear with it. No, fired back some feminists who are of the contention that the subordination of women did not seem to be in any way coterminous with capitalism. 'Not only had especially oppressive forms of patriarchy flourished in pre-capitalist societies; the situation in many socialist societies indicated that the abolition of capitalism would not necessarily lead to patriarchy's demise' (Stichter and Parpart 1990).

If patriarchy is neither derived from biological differences between men and women nor is it coterminous with capitalism, what is it then and how does it serve to exploit women? We return to Mies (1986a) for an answer to this conceptual problem. According to her, patriarchy constitutes the totality of exploitative relations which affect women. The concept of 'exploitation' rather than those of 'subordination' and 'oppression' is therefore central not only to the definition of patriarchy but also in understanding how it works; Mies argues that exploitation means:

> ....that someone gains something by robbing someone else or is living at the expense of someone else. It is bound up with the emergence of men's dominance over others, or one class over others, or one people over others.

Patriarchy then can be understood as a gender ideology which is socially constructed by men to exploit women; it is the first asymmetrical layer in the relationship between men and women. Relating in detail how the patriarchal ideology finds concrete exploitative expression with particular reference to the gender division of labour, Henn (1988) wrote:

> Women are required to accept labour obligations which patriarchal ideology and power attaches to the roles of daughter, wife, and mother. When those female labour obligations exceed the labour obligations of the men, we have evidence of exploitation which benefits patriarchy. Women can be both directly and indirectly exploited. They are directly exploited when their labour provides products and services which are immediately expropriated by the patriarchal class. They are indirectly exploited when they perform the child rearing work required for the survival of young children even though men control the labour and surplus labour of children who have reached a more productive age.

Patriarchy and the pattern of exploitation that goes with it should not be treated as universal or static. Nonetheless, it remains a powerful ideology of exploitation which can be applied across cultures, regions, and socio-economic classes.

In most Sahelian societies, wrote Monimart (1988), 'it is clear that the exercise of responsibility, the power of decision and access to the means of production, are in the hands of the men'. Among the pastoralists of the Sahel, for instance, the ownership of cattle as a means of production is controlled by men.

The older men also control the labour power of young men and all categories of women. Young men eventually succeed their men elders who are 'condemned by the logic of lineage reproduction' (Mafeje 1991). Mafeje contends that 'within the system, the labour power of women is regularly exploited by men, whether they be elders or juniors, without structural compensation as in the case of young males'. He argued that this exploitative patriarchal arrangement applies even to matrilineal societies.

The relationship between the elderly men and young men is also rooted in patriarchy but this is a relationship of *domination* and not exploitation. This view supports our position that patriarchy should be simply understood as a gender ideology which is socially constructed by men to exploit women and perhaps dominate young men in transition to adulthood.

The interface between patriarchy and class has been a subject of considerable debate especially among those categorised as socialist

feminists.[4] A consideration of class in addition to patriarchy makes it possible for us to examine not only *between* gender work patterns and exploitation but also *within* gender work patterns and exploitation; thus, the traditional marxist position that women's oppression is accepted only as an additional explanatory variable and not as the explanation. We argue that in relation to men, most women do more work and for longer hours; in relation to women, some women work less and for lesser hours. Ahmad and Loufti (1985) citing Agarwal (1981) conclude that:

> One of the most basic insights resulting from research is the differentiation of rural women. Far from being a homogenous category, there may be even greater economic distinctions among women than among men of different classes in rural areas (as well-off women may be able to withdraw completely from work). And poor women suffer disproportionately, with pauperisation and expanding landlessness. It is commonly presumed that where the household obtains a measured improvement, the individuals also gain, even if unequally. But it appears that, at least in the case of Africa, women may be rendered worse off even when 'the household' seems to gain.

Thus while patriarchy affects women of all classes, there are important differences between them both in terms of the work they perform; decision making power and access to resources. One particularly interesting study on the intersection of class and gender has shown that husband's power over wives is based not only on prevailing gender ideology but also on 'privileged access to income and coercive means of control' (Beneria and Roldan 1987). Thus, accessibility to income by the wife may succeed either in overturning patriarchy or at least counter balancing it:

> Women whose husbands provide steady income, but who themselves provide more than 40 per cent of household resources can demand more respectful behaviour from husbands ... When husbands' economic contributions are sporadic and wives contribute more than 40 per cent of household income, women may refuse to perform their domestic duties ... (Beneria and Roldan 1987).

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[4] Feminist theories have been categorised into liberal feminism, radical feminism, traditional feminism, Socialist feminism (Jaggar 1983) and feminist political economy (Stamp 1989).

This research finding may not apply to all situations but its significance lies in the realisation that access to resources by women not only gives them some independence but checks the tenacity of patriarchy.

Rural Poverty

At this point, we examine the second layer of exploitation which has some specificity on rural women. It is generally known that Africa is a rural continent with majority of people living on agricultural and pastoral production. Most of the people in the continent are very poor and the level of poverty is higher for the rural population than the urban. The following table shows the urban-rural composition of poverty in some sub-Saharan African countries:

It could be suggested that while there is widespread poverty in the whole of sub-Saharan Africa (as shown in Table 2) in general and the rural areas in particular, the magnitude of poverty in the Sahel is greater as a result of the environmental crisis. With respect to Niger, for instance, it has been observed that within rural communities, the income gap between the poorest twenty per cent and the best-off twenty per cent can be tenfold or more (Charlick 1991).

Citing other sources Charlick argued that:

> The stress of drought and hunger in the past years, however, has contributed to greater rural inequality as better-off villagers and merchants have been able to buy up land and employ labour cheaply. As a result of the severe droughts and famines, an alarming percentage of villagers are now nearly landless and virtually without assets.

Poverty of the rural environment in relation to the urban areas must be understood not only in terms of conventional indicators such as differentiated income level but also in relation to literacy, access to medical facilities, asymmetrical power relations and so on. While there exists some level of differentiation among people in the rural areas, it is clear that the 'rural poor' constitute the majority. But who are the rural poor?

Table 2: Urban-Rural Composition of Poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa as Percentage of Total Population Classified as Poor

Country	Urban	Rural
Côte d'Ivoire	6	94
Ethiopia (a)	26	74
Gambia	40	60
Ghana	20	80
Madagascar	8	92
Malawi	1	99
Mali (b)	13	87
Rwanda	1	99
Senegal (c)	21	79
Sierra Leone	32	68
Tanzania	15	85
Uganda	8	92
Weighted Average	16	84

Source: Husain, I., 1994, 'Does Structural Adjustment Help or Hurt the Poor ?' *The World Bank and Poverty Reduction* (The Hague, Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

Note: a,b,c, – Sahelian Countries.

Oakley and Marsden (1984, 1990) admit that 'the category is extremely broad and does not necessarily allow us to differentiate between those who are being impoverished or enriched within such a category'. Generally they are the great mass of the people in the rural areas who suffer from the following problems identified by Oakley and Marsden (1984, 1990). According to them, the rural poor lack resources for development, lack viable organisations to represent their interests, are exposed to the power of local money lenders and traders; are dependent and marginalised; and whose lives are characterised by an air of dependency and despair. It is important to understand that 'women are often veiled behind these disadvantaged groups and thus forgotten in any formal categorisation, and

in being disguised frequently suffer the harsher extremes of poverty'. And this is the crux of the matter. We have earlier alluded to how the position of women determine the pattern of the gender division of labour and the attendant exploitation. In this section, the paper argues that the poverty of the rural environment affects women in both specific and general ways. It is argued that some rural women are exploited in specific ways because they are *poor women* living in the poverty of the rural environment and most women are exploited generally because they are *women* living in the rural environment. An important observation must be made that while women do not necessarily benefit from increased incomes either at the household or community levels, the burden of poverty is pushed to them when the household or community is poor or under stress.

Now, one specific way in which poor rural women are exploited is the increase in workload which we have discussed in the preceding section of this paper. In addition, studies in rural India have shown that poor rural women and men are exploited and abused in several ways. Mies (1986b) reports that:

> sexual violence against poor peasant, and agricultural labourer women occurs often in the context of a so-called punitive action of the rich against the rural poor. The rich teach both poor women and men 'lessons' by burning their huts, beating up and killing of men, and raping of women.

Mies elaborates this further:

> The victims of sexual oppression are often the women of landless labourers and poor peasants who have to work in the fields. Whereas the rich peasants and landlords keep their women 'protected' in their houses, the poorer women have to work for their livelihood. They are not only dependent for their work on the landlords and richer peasants, but in the context of the dominant patriarchal rural value system, they cannot be 'protected', that is, be 'respectable' women who are not to be exposed to the sights of other men.

Most rural women irrespective of their class positions are however exploited in one general way which is peculiar (though not restricted) to the rural environment. And this is the frequent appeal to 'tradition' and its conceptualisation as something static and associated with rurality. Walker (1994) writing on South Africa has shown that 'tradition', 'custom' and 'African culture' has often been used as legitimising discourses to exploit rural women in several ways. The appeal to tradition together with other

interlocking systems of authority constitutes what he calls 'official rural patriarchy':

> Too often it is male definition of 'culture' that are accepted uncritically as those of the 'community', a hegemony that the proponents of this view readily promote. In view of their subordinate position many rural women find it difficult to challenge the dominant view of tradition, head-on and their views are likely to display ambivalence, even contradiction as a result.

It is generally suggested that the challenge of women's demand for their rights and improved socio-economic conditions is often met with the counter 'accusation that they have abandoned their 'traditional' responsibilities and are seeking to undermine the family' (Stamp 1989). The controversy surrounding the discourse on female circumcision is one example where tradition has been recruited as an ahistorical concept to either justify and defend the practice, especially in the rural areas, or to silence those who speak against it. The women living under rural poverty, disease and illiteracy generally suffer from this form of exploitation.

The Sahelian Environmental Crisis

The paper now examines the third layer of exploitation which it considers as very peculiar to women in the Sahel. As we showed earlier, the Sahel is facing an environmental crisis of great proportions and the effects of the crisis fall disproportionately on the shoulders of women. Interestingly, it is in relation to the environmental crisis that we shall see the simultaneity of gender, class and geographical location in defining the character of the gender division of labour and its outcomes.

Women in the rural Sahel, like their counterparts in many rural regions of the world are involved in a series of both domestic and agricultural work. A report by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa has shown that rural women in Africa do up to three quarters of all agricultural work in addition to their domestic work.[5] Though there may be considerable regional and country variations, the UNECA estimates

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[5] The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) estimates that women in Africa carry out thirty per cent of ploughing; 50 per cent of planting, 60 per cent of harvesting; 70 per cent of weeding; 85 per cent of processing and storing crops all in addition to carrying out 95 per cent of domestic work (Rodda 1991).

reflect the general pattern of the gender division of labour. In an extensive study covering five different countries of the Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Senegal) as well as Cape Verde, Monimart (1988) has found that desertification, the most serious environmental problem of the Sahel, 'penalises women' in several ways. First, fuelwood supplies have become a serious problem and women now go further from their villages for fuel gathering. Even in normal circumstances, it is time-consuming and under the current crisis it is 'becoming unbearable'. Second, the problem of water shortage has reached 'critical proportions' and the women sometimes have to go at night to the well, where the wait is interminable. Third, 'the degradation and reduced availability of cultivable land penalises the women particularly' Monimart notes that two contradictory trends have emerged in this respect: 'On the one hand the women are allocated increasingly marginal plots of land, or refused land altogether; while on the other hand, the departure of the men leaves them with new responsibilities and tasks as more and more of the women find themselves acting alone as head of the family farmholding'.

Other serious effects of desertification noted in Monimart's study are as follows: the reduction of supplementary wild plant products which 'account for a high proportion of women's incomes and provides nutritional supplements for the entire family.' And finally, the threatening of women's craftwork activities as a result of the disappearing doum palm and andropogon leaves. The point must be made that the Sahelian rural women have often supported their families through their craftwork activities.

Monimart concludes that:

> .... the cumulative ecological impact of desertification has severely affected women's daily lives in the Sahel. Access to the essential sources of life has become uncertain and even, in the case of wood supplies, prohibited and punishable. The dry season, once a time when the pace of work slowed down, is now devoted to intense activity merely for survival, giving women no chance to rest before the hard work of the cropping season begins again.

Studies in other parts of the world with similar environmental problems have also found that women not only experience the same conditions of increased workload and falling nutritional and income standards, but

suffer other wider medical problems as well. In an Indian survey by Agarwal (1990), it was found that in 1972 in Bihar, women walked 2 kilometres to reach the forests but by 1983, the distance had increased to between 8 and 10 kilometres. The study, linking the time spent in firewood gathering to the time required for food production, concluded that because of the increasing amount of time spent searching for firewood, there is less time for food production. Therefore, 'shortages of fuel can therefore affect malnutrition just as much as shortages of food'.

Berinda (1991) also reporting on a study of rural Maharashtra, India, found that depletion of resources have made the task of gathering fuel, fodder and water extremely time-consuming and difficult, 'often costing women their health and sometimes their lives'.

For example:

> It is harder to get firewood suitable for cooking and women have had to use biomass products such as cow dung cakes, waste crops, and weeds for fuel. These sources of energy are not only inefficient but also unhealthy. The toxic fumes emitted during cooking were identified in Gujarat as the main cause of respiratory diseases, a leading health problem for women and girls in India.

All these findings indicate the wider structural implications of environmental crisis on rural women in the Sahel. Thus one can argue that the Sahelian rural woman requires an additional 'day' to battle with the environmental crisis. This is however not to suggest that the Sahelian crisis only affects women; it has wider consequences and men are also affected. But, most studies have found that under conditions of serious environmental crisis such as drought, men tend to migrate; leaving behind their wives as 'widows' of the crisis. Gender becomes central because of the asymmetrical pattern of the gender division of labour and access to resources.

The patriarchal model of male (bread-winner) and female (housewife) allows men to move during crisis but women are in most cases left at home with the children. This is particularly true during the periodic drought in the African Sahel. Gender is also central in the analysis of the crisis because it has been found that in the socially constructed display of the so-called 'maternal altruism' (Whitehead 1984a), women subordinate their own needs and choices in fulfilment of what is 'expected' of them as

mother, wife, sister etc. It has been established that women go without food or new clothing to ensure that their children or other working members of the family have enough food and clothing. In addition, research into the cooking and eating habits of the families shows that women eat last, sometimes the left-overs after all other members of the family, including the husband, have eaten or girl children being discriminated against in terms of allocation of food (Chen *et al.* 1981).

We end this section by noting that for both women and men,

> ... there is a class specificity and location specificity involved. Traditionally, the forests have provided, and continue to provide, food and shelter, especially for the poor. Many of the products are essential for survival during critical times. When it comes to food, fuel and shelter, much is gathered as opposed to being purchased (Agarwal 1990).

Conclusion

The paper has argued for a transcendence of the conventional descriptive analysis of the gender division of labour as constituting a 'double day' and 'double exploitation' for women. It has attempted to broaden and deepen this conceptualisation by examining in some details, the general and specific aspects of both the pattern and exploitative outcomes of the gender division of labour in the African Sahel. Analysis of the gender division of labour should therefore focus not only on issues pertaining to patriarchy and class, but be extended to examine other location and crisis specific experiences of women. Furthermore, our understanding of the concept of exploitation of women within the context of the gender division of labour should cover not only where women live and what they do, but also the depth and breadth of what women suffer as a result of where they live and what they do. It is only such level of analysis which will constructively shift the debate from descriptive analysis of the gender division of labour, to mapping out the contours of a restructured gendered work pattern.

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