Book Reviews

Gendering African History

A Review of Jane L. Parpart and Kathleen A. Staudt, eds. *Women and the State in Africa.* Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner, 1989, 229 pp.; Sharon Stichter and Jane L. Parpart, eds. *Women, Employment and the Family in the International Division of Labour.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990. 253pp.; Luise White. *The Comforts of the Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990. 285 pp.; and *Family, State, and Economy in Africa,* Special Issue, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 16, No.4 (Summer, 1991).

Not so long ago women hardly featured in the literature on African History, society and politics. Now gender analysis is taken seriously in all the major social science disciplines. In the process of incorporating the dimensions of gender, many conventional interpretations, theories and paradigms have been refined, reformulated, or rejected altogether. One could argue that it is no longer permissible now to write history as his-story. It is gradually becoming, and must become, our-story. But the day of gender-neutral history and social science is still some way off. In order to get there we need to uncover and reconstruct women's lives, contributions and struggles. The concepts and methodologies we use must constantly be interrogated, so that they can be stripped of their patriarchal and sexist prejudices, which help to envelope women's work and activities, concerns and values, lives and struggles in cloak of invisibility.

This paper is a review of four recent works that seek, in their various ways, to advance the process of integrating gender analysis into African historical and political studies. They re-examine, among other things, the questions of state and family formations, the development of rural peasantries and urban working classes, and the constructions of, and struggles over, gender. For the sake of analytical clarity, the review is divided into four parts. It begins by examining how these studies deal with the issue of women and politics, followed by the subject of women and peasant agriculture, women and urbanization, and ends with a discussion of the politics of producing feminist knowledge in African studies as exemplified in the reviewed works.

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Women and the State

Parpart and Staudt argue, quite correctly, that conventional analyses of the state in Africa have tended to ignore women. The book seeks to change that, to demonstrate that the process of state formation is a gendered one. The various contributions in the book demonstrate that women have been excluded and marginalized from the political process. But despite that women have organized and fought back. However, the discussion tends to be heavier on the political subordination of women than on their struggles. Mbilinyi's[1] paper on colonial state intervention over beer brewing in Dar es Salaam in the 1930s is the only one that deals with women's struggles at length. It is also the only one that focuses almost entirely on the colonial period. The rest of the papers mainly examine the post colonial period, and deal with such issues as state policies towards market women,[2] women and land resettlement[3], the impact of development policies on women,[4], relations between women and the military,[5] and the effects of economic crises on peasant women.[6] While the various authors conceptualize and problematize the process of state formation and women's access to state structures and resources differently, there is general agreement that the 'female experience in African politics during the past century... [has been] one of exclusion, inequality, neglect, and subsequent female consolidation and reaction'.[7]

It can be seen that the range of topics covered is relatively wide. But the same cannot be said about the regions and time periods. Only five countries are examined. Two of the papers are on Zambia. West Africa is short shrifted with one paper and North Africa is not even mentioned. The same skewed coverage can be observed in the *Signs* collection, whose papers deal with six countries. Two of the papers are on Uganda. North Africa is also left out, quite deliberately, the authors tell us, because in their 'view, North Africa represents quite different patterns from Africa south of the Sahara".[8]

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1 Marjorie Mbilinyi, 'This is an Uncomfortable Business': Colonial State Intervention in Urban Tanzania", in Parpart and Staudt, eds.

2 KarenT Hansen, 'The Black Market and Women Traders in Lusaka, Zambia', in Parpart and Staudt, eds.

3 Susan Jacobs, 'Zimbabwe: State, Class, and Gendered Models of Land Resettlement,' in Parpart and Staudt, eds.

4 Monica L Munachonga, 'Women and the State, Class, and Gendered Models of Land Resettlement,' in Parpart and Staudt, eds.

5 Nina Mba, 'Kaba and Khaki: Women and the Militarized State in Nigeria', in Parpart and Staudt, eds.

6 Catherine Newbury and Brooke G. Schoepf, "State, Peasantry, and Agrarian Crisis in Zaire: Does Gender Make a Difference?", in Parpart and Staudt, eds.

7 Naomi Chazan, 'Gender Perspectives on African States', in Parpart and Staudt, eds. p. 186.

8 'Editorial', *Signs*, p.646.

Why and how? Certainly nothing in Lazreg's paper on Algerian women in the Stichter and Parpart collection,[9] bears out the contention that women's situation in North Africa differs markedly from 'patterns from Africa South of the Sahara'. Incidentally, Lazreg's paper was probably included less because Algeria is seen as a part of Africa, than a part of the so-called Third World, which is the focus of the collection, despite its grand sounding title. It is a shame that the imperialist and racist construction of Africa as 'Black' has invaded studies of African women as well.

As already mentioned, only one of the papers in Parpart and Staudt deals exclusively with the colonial period. For a book claiming to represent 'the first systematic effort to introduce gender into the analysis of the state in Africa',[10] this is a great pity. The modern African state, as Fatton[11] calls it, was created by colonialism. It probably makes more sense, in fact, to call it *post-colonial*, rather than *African*. Thus the book is less informative on the role of gender in the origins or information of the modern state in Africa than it might otherwise appear.

Given its limited geographic and temporal coverage it is not surprising that Parpart and Staudt's collection's theoretic contribution is rather desultory. The introduction is a rudimentary outline of the dependency and modes of production approaches used to analyze African societies, and the perspectives that inform discussions on the state. The two so-called theoretical chapters are particularly unsatisfactory. Most of the generalizations they make about Africa are untenable because they are constructed on thin empirical data.

Fatton's paper gives political science a bad name. It is full of fatuous and unsubstantiated assertions masquerading as theory. African societies and states are portrayed as peculiar deviations from some universal norm. In Africa, he tells us, 'women's subordination is more pervasive, acute, and accepted'.[12] Than where? Women's struggle for emancipation in Africa, he continues, 'is replete with contradictions, ambivalence, and silence'.[13] Silence, no. Contradictions and ambivalence, yes. But where isn't that the case? And he variously describes the African state as weak, fragile, non-integral, non-hegemonic and authoritarian without authority. It is because the African ruling classes are non-hegemonic, he argues, that popular resistance

9 Marnia Lazreg, 'Women, Work and Social Change in Algeria', in Stichter and Parpart, eds.
10 Chazan, *op.cit.*, p.185.
11 Robert Fatten, 'Gender, Class, and State in Africa', in Parpart and Staudt, eds.
12 *Ibid.*, p.51.
13 *Ibid.*, p.54.

'is seldom frontal and revolutionary. Resistance takes the form of withdrawal from the public realm...'.[14] Are we to conclude that the American ruling class is non-hegemonic because Americans are not 'revolutionary' and the majority of them have withdrawn from the electoral process? Fatton mistakes conjunctural appearances for structural realities. In the aftermath of the tumultuous struggles for democracy that have rocked Africa in the last few years his analysis appears dated. Lovett[15] displays the same tendency towards over generalization. She constructs her theory from the cases of Nairobi and the Copperbelt. One wished both Fatton and Lovett had heeded Harness's admonition that the processes and effects of state formation 'in distinct social segments are highly variable in historical terms and often differ from one country to the next'.[16]

Musisi's[17] paper in the *Signs* collection amply demonstrates the complex historical processes at work in gender and state formation during the precolonial era, which defy the kind of simplistic generalizations made by Fatton and Lovett. It examines the relationship between state formation, women's status, and marriage forms in Buganda from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries. She examines what she calls 'elite polygyny' and argues that 'polygyny in precolonial Buganda must be distinguished from colonial and post-colonial polygynous practices and viewed, most critically, in the context of elite strategies to create and ultimately to control not only economic but political and social components of state apparatus as well'.[18] It is a fascinating, richly textured analysis, reconstructed through à feminist rereading and reinterpretation of Buganda oral and written sources. It is demonstrated that 'elite polygyny' was an integral part the three processes of state, class, and gender formation. The point is made that women became more differentiated. While the majority were excluded from 'direct involvement in nuganda's political process', the wives of the elite, the *Bakembuga*, 'played an important role at the state level in balancing internal and regional politics. The *Bakembuga* became not only the mothers of kings but kingmakers as well'.[19]

Musisi leaves her story in 1900. One wishes she had carried it forward to show how the superimposition of the colonial state on Buganda transformed the patterns of gender, class and state formation. There can be little doubt

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14 *Ibid.*, p.55.
15 Margot Lovett, 'Gender relations, Class Formation, and the Colonial State in Africa', in Parpart and Staudt, eds.
16 Hansen, *op.cit.*, p.143.
17 Nakanyike B. Musisi, 'Women: "Elite Polygyny", and Buganda State Formation' in *Signs*, pp.757-786.
18 *Ibid.*, p.758.
19 *Ibid.*, p.786.

that colonialism transformed these patterns in complex and contradictory ways. It is often assumed that Indirect Rule shielded Buganda from intensive state interventions witnesses in settler colonies like Kenya. The paper by Summers[20] challenges that assumption. It argues that the British colonizers devised and tried to implement a highly intrusive policy on reproduction itself, ostensibly in response to Uganda's population decline in the early twentieth century. At first decline was blamed on the trypanosomiasis epidemic which killed 250,000 to 330,000 between 1900 and 1920. After the epidemic, official attention turned to the continuing low birth rates, which were attributed primarily to sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), especially syphilis.

Out of this, the colonial state and its functionaries, built a crisis, against which they resolved to intervene medically. Before long, medical intervention was accompanied by moral intervention as the crisis of disease was turned into a moral crisis, and the incidence of syphilis, which Summers shows was exaggerated, became a barometer of African immorality. From here to intervention in the reproductive practices and choices of African women was but a short step. African women came to be viewed as 'clumsier, stupider, and dirtier than African men'. The state felt justified 'to intervene in the private sphere of pregnancy, birth and infant care'.[21] This was colonial social engineering at its most intimate, an unashamed attempt to reshape African families and reproductive behaviour. Summers indicates that women avoided the STD programs, but the overall impact of colonial state interventions over reproduction and motherhood is not adequately drawn out.

The colonial state did not always work single-handedly to impose its capitalist patriarchal will on African women. As Schmidt[22] argues in the case of colonial Zimbabwe, African chiefs and elders colluded with colonial officials and functionaries to control the behaviour of African women. The agendas of the two groups were of course varied. The former were trying 'to reassert their waning authority over women, their services, and their offspring', while the latter 'were concerned with obtaining cheap African male labour. If it took the regulation of African women's sexual practices to achieve this objective, the state was prepared to pass laws to that effect.[23] Schmidt believes that the European colonizers strove to control women not only because they suffered from deep-seated racial and gender prejudices

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20 Carol Summers, 'Intimate Colonialism: The Imperial Production of Reproduction in Uganda, 1907-1925', in *Signs*, pp.787-807.

21 *Ibid.*, p.800.

22 Elizabeth Schmidt, 'Patriarchy, Capitalism, and the Colonial State in Zimbabwe', *Signs*, pp.732-756.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 756.

against African women, but also because controlling the sexuality and mobility of African women offered a means of mitigating the disruptive impact of migrant labour on African family life, and preventing the collapse of indigenous authority structures, especially in the face of growing women's resistance. Apart from the various restrictions imposed on women's opportunities and mobility, the colonial state, relying on age-old European misconceptions about African society and the selective memories of African chiefs and elders, created 'customary' law, which turned flexible custom into inflexible law.

The collusion between the African rulers and the colonial state does not mean that the two groups share equal responsibility for the construction of women's subordination in colonial Africa, as some writers, including Schmidt, seem eager to suggest. It should be remembered that the African chiefs and elders were themselves subordinate to the colonial authorities. The tendency to talk indiscriminately of 'African men' must be resisted, for African men, no less than African women, were not homogeneous. They differentiated according to class, status, and occupation, so that they did not share similar interests with regards to women's position in society. Much of the new revisionist literature which rejects the functionalist argument that the colonial state instituted migrant labour because it was functional to capital, by showing that migrant labour was also a product of domestic struggles between African men and women,[24] often slips into the same functionalism, except now the argument is that migrant labour was functional for men. Just as migrant was not functional for all fractions of capital at all times, women's subordination was not functional for all men at all times.

Women as Peasants

Parpart's and Staudt's collection contains two papers which seek to examine African women as peasants. Both of them are on the contemporary situation. One is on the agrarian crisis in Zaire and the failure of remedial policies devised by the state and international lenders to target women and incorporate their needs and concerns. This will result, the authors argue, in the crisis deepening because women are central to the agrarian economy.[25] The other paper examines land resettlement in independent Zimbabwe and argues that while legislation has tried to remove some of the worst aspects of colonial legislation which discriminated against women, women's needs continue to be neglected 'in many spheres of state policy, including the

24 See, for example, Belinda Bozzoli, 'Marxism, Feminism and South African Studies', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 9, No.2, 1983: 139-171; and Jane L. Parpart, 'The Household and the Mine Shaft: Gender and Class Struggles on the Zambian Copperbelt, 1926-64', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 13, No.1, 1986: 36-56.

25 Newbury and Schoepf, *op.cit.*

resettlement program'.[26] In the individual family resettlement programs women have been marginalized, while progress in the cooperative resettlement programs has been hampered by poor government funding and men's appropriation of the use of advanced technology such as tractors and harvesters.

These studies may be interesting, but they only scratch the surface of women's experiences as peasants. This reinforces a point made earlier that this collection lack a long-term historical perspective and is excessively narrow in its coverage. The 'theoretical' paper by Lovett also helps to underscore the importance of treating the precolonial period historically, rather than merely as a static backdrop against which changes brought by colonial capitalism are set. Her analysis of gender and class formation in modern Africa is predicated on a cursory and misleading review of the sexual division of labour in what she calls 'precapitalist' societies. It is simplistically assumed, for example, that patriarchy was universal, unambiguous and uncontested. Also, social age is defined only in relation to men, the omnipotent male elders of anthropological folklore. This ignores the varied and complex situation in the matrilineal societies, which existed in the regions she discusses.

There is one paper in the *Signs* collection which attempts to begin filling the gender gap in the historiography of rural production in the precolonial period, and another that covers the last 150 years, spanning the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods. Using Lesotho as a case study, Eldridge[27] seeks to demonstrate that women 'were the primary agents of accumulation and growth in the nineteenth century economy of Lesotho.[28] Thus the economic growth and prosperity that Lesotho enjoyed in the nineteenth century cannot be understood without considering women's contribution. She shows that in the agricultural economy women were responsible for gathering, caring for pigs and poultry, cultivation, bird-scaring, harvesting and threshing. In addition to food production, women also looked after food processing, they fetched water and collected fuel for cooking, and made many of the household goods, such baskets and pottery. Many of the goods traded outside the household were produced by women. Despite this, however, women enjoyed little political power.

What is administrable about this paper is the way it captures the changes that took place in the gender division of labour. It is noted, for example, that as building in cut stone spread, home building ceased to be a female task

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26 Jacobs, *op.cit.*, p.179.

27 Elizabeth A Eldridge, 'Women in Production: The Economic Role of Women in Nineteenth-Century Lesotho', *Signs*, pp.707-731.

28 *Ibid.*, p.708.

and was taken over by men. In particular, it is shown that the widespread adoption of ox-drawn plows changed the labour time of both men and women. Women's workload in farming increased, in exchange for which they 'gave up other activities such as weaving, pottery and home building'. Men's labour was also 'reallocated; that is, they began to help women. It became more common to hold work parties for weeding, harvesting, and threshing, at which married and unmarried men helped with the agricultural task that women usually performed'.[29] As men became more involved in agriculture, and the goods that they previously produced in the household, such as blankets, clothing, and wooden and iron tools, weapons and utensils became readily available in the markets, they gave up on, or spent less time, producing these goods. For their part, the young and the old were allocated new tasks. These changes altered the old forms of women's subordination, empowerment, struggles, and differentiation. From Eldridge's study Basotho women are not pawns of some ubiquitous patriarchy, but historical actors who consciously shaped the changing world in which they lived.

The term 'traditional' has been widely abused in African studies. What often appears 'traditional' were practices and ideologies invented at specific moments in the recent past. Carney's and Watts paper on agrarian change in Senegambia amply bears this out.[30] They argue that the agricultural system that currently operates in the Senegambia is not 'traditional' in the sense that it is ancient. It emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, a product of the growing commoditization of peasant production. In the last 150 years repeated attempts have been made to intensify rice production. Intensification was both a social and gendered process and one that was, moreover, continually negotiated and struggled over. Before the mid-nineteenth century, the gender division of labour was based on tasks. But as the commodity production of groundnuts expanded, there was a change from 'task- to crop-specific gender roles'. Rice, grown mostly for household consumption, became women's work, while groundnuts largely produced for export, became men's work. Also, 'as groundnut cultivation expanded on upland fields away from the floodplain and swamps, 'male and female agricultural labour became increasingly spatially separated between upland and lowland zones, giving rise to a much more rigid sexual division of labour by crop'.[31]

The withdrawal of male labour power from rice production intensified female labour time in food production. But women burdened as they were with other household activities were unable to produce enough rice, and so

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29 *Ibid.*, p.723.

30 Judith Carney and Michael Watts, 'Disciplining Women? Rice, Mechanization, and the Evolution of Mandinka Gender Relations in Senegambia, *Signs*, pp. pp.651-681.

31 *Ibid.*, p.657.

the region became increasingly dependent on food imports. When, the colonial state was established in 1889 it was alarmed by the growing food imports and thus began attempts to reestablish household food self-sufficiency by increasing rice production. The measures included the introduction of improved Asian rice, the clearance of mangrove lands, and the establishment of a series of large- and small-scale irrigation schemes. Rice acreage and production increased. But it could not be sustained unless the gender division of labour was transformed. Further intensification depended on bringing men into rice cultivation. But men 'successfully resisted efforts to intensify their labour on the grounds that rice was "a women's crop"'.[32]

In the meantime, the colonial rice development projects generated conflicts between men and women over the control of land and crops. Mandinka men and women could claim the individual ownership of land if they cleared that land themselves; if it was collectively cleared it fell under common household ownership. In the 1940s and 1950s women's attempts to assert control over the land that they had cleared from the newly opened mangrove swamps and lay claims on the output, were resisted by men, who impressed upon the colonial authorities that women's land ownership contravened 'tradition'. The latter obliged and 'determined that the new rice lands were household, not individual property'.[33] The struggles between men and women, and women's resistance against further intensification of their labour time and appropriation of their surplus, led to the failure of the post-war rice schemes based on ambitious irrigation projects. For example, women were reluctant to work as wage labourers for the mechanized and large-scale irrigated rice project initiated by the Colonial Development Corporation (CDC) in 1949. When sharecropping was introduced to save the project 'women systematically underreported their harvest to appropriate larger shares of the crop'.[34] The CDC abandoned the project in 1958, and at independence the new government returned the rice lands to local cultivators.

The post-independence government was no more successful in resolving the productivity and labour crises in rice production. Initially it tried to encourage the development of small-scale, irrigated units controlled by households and based on the double-cropping of high yielding green revolution rice varieties. Although men's participation increased, their attempts to claim women's labour for year-round cultivation was resisted, for historically, 'the farming system was attuned to a five-month cycle'.[35] Following the

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32 *Ibid.*, p.661.
33 *Ibid.*, p.664.
34 *Ibid.* p.667.
35 *Ibid.*, p.670.

failure of small-scale irrigation projects to lessen the country's food dependency, a large-scale irrigation project was introduced in the mid-1980s, based on a coercive labour regime, which reinforced patriarchal family relations. As before, the new project provoked resistance and contestation along social and gender lines. It can be seen that the development of rice production in the Senegambian region involved a complex interplay and reconstructions of gender roles and property rights, state interventions, and household conjugal relations and struggles.

Women and the City

Research on African women has privileged rural over urban women. This partly reflects the fact that, to date, the vast majority of African women have been rural dwellers, primarily engaged in agricultural work. When urban women are discussed, the focus has been mostly on their activities as traders or informal sector operators. The literature on colonial West Africa concentrates on women as traders, and that on East and Southern Africa on women as prostitutes. This divide can be seen in the works under review.

Mann[36] explores women's access to landed property, capital, and labour in the city of Lagos in the second half of the nineteenth century. During this period Lagos expanded rapidly, thanks to the commercial revolution brought about by the end of the slave trade and the growth of the palm trade. The result was that an urban real estate market developed and land prices escalated. The alienation, privatization, and commercialization of urban land affected men and women differently. Although women tried to take advantage of the changes in land tenure, 'many fewer women than men purchased or were granted land',[37] due to the discriminatory policies of both the monarchy and the colonial government. However, there was a minority of women household heads who were able to acquire land. Other Lagos women inherited privately owned land from relatives and husbands. Limited access to landed property undermined women's access to capital, credit and labour, which, in turn, circumscribed their trading opportunities.

Consequently, women became increasingly dependent upon men for land, housing, and capital. At the same time gender conflict in Lagos households over labour and resources intensified. Thus, from the mid-nineteenth century, in the face of expanding trade and changes in the land market, 'women in Lagos faced economic disadvantages that limited their ability to take advantage of new commercial opportunities and weakened their economic position relative to men. The final decades of the nineteenth

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36 Kristin Mann, 'Women, Landed Property, and the Accumulation of Wealth in Early Colonial Lagis', in *Signs*, pp.682-706.

37 *Ibid.*, p.691.

century were no golden age for Lagos women',[38] as studies which celebrate the penetration of European commercial capital tend to imply. At least for Lagos women it was not a time of expanding opportunities and increasing autonomy.

If commercial opportunities for Lagos women were closing at the turn of the twentieth century, wage employment opportunities opened up for some of them, as Parpart[39] shows in her paper on the growth of women's wage employment in southern Nigerian cities from the late nineteenth century to the 1980s. She demonstrates that the size of women wage workers remained minuscule until the Second World War. There was rapid expansion in women's wage employment after independence, thanks to the expansion of the economy, increased educational opportunities for women, changes in family structure, and struggles by women for economic independence. Despite their increased participation, women continued to be clustered in a few occupations, principally nursing, secretarial work and teaching, which were seen as extensions of women's work in the domestic sphere.

The main objective of Parpart's paper is to examine the manifestations and impact of the double day on Nigerian working women. She demonstrates, quite convincingly, that these women were not immune from the burdens of the double day, especially as domestic labour became scarcer and more expensive following the oil boom, and day care centres remained in short supply. The dearth of paid and unpaid household labour was aggravated by the introduction of free universal education for children in 1976; 'parents who had previously been happy to send unschooled children to work in affluent relatives homes, now felt they should send their children to school'.[40] She concludes that although Nigerian working women have developed various coping mechanisms, from the careful regulation of time and fertility, to spurning marriage altogether, the reproductive burdens of the double day have clearly undermined their career mobility. All this is true. Unfortunately, Parpart tends to weaken her case by focusing excessively on 'middle class' women, whose 'domestic labour may be more managerial than manual'.[41] The basis of the distinction between her 'middle class' and 'working class' women is not made clear.

The only other study that examines women's urban wage employment in the works under review is Lazreg's paper on Algeria. It focuses on the period after independence, and shows that until 1978, despite the attempts to

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38 *Ibid.*, p.705.
39 Jane L Parpart, 'Wage Earning Women and the Double Day: The Nigerian Case', in Stichter and Parpart, eds.
40 *Ibid.*, p.170.
41 *Ibid.*, p.177.

construct a socialist economy, women hardly increased their share of wage employment, although official statistics have tended to underestimate women's labour force participation. Algerian wage earning women work predominantly in the urban centres, and they are concentrated in the professions and services, rather than industry. They also tend to be relatively more educated than working men, although 'their education does not beget positions of responsibility'.[42] The major value of the paper is that it explodes the idealist myth that in 'Muslim' societies like Algeria Islam is the explanation of gender inequality. She argues, and proceeds to demonstrate, that the relatively low participation of women in the labour force can be attributed to a number of structural factors, especially the patterns of economic growth, demographic growth and family formation.

Stichter concurs with Lazreg that in order to understand the levels and patterns of women's wage employment, one has to take into account the organization of production and market factors, as well as the family or household structures, which entails examining such issues as household incomes and resources, power and decision-making patterns. Her paper offers an extensive and impressive survey of the literature on both the growth of female employment in the Third World and theoretical approaches to the household. It is pointed out that 'despite the gender gap, female employment in the developing world has shown surprisingly rapid growth in recent years'.[43] Needless to say, there are important sectoral and cross-national differences. Some African nations are among the few in the world where general female rates of labour force participation approach those of men. She argues that the prevailing and competing neo-classical and marxist theories on households are both based on the nuclear or conjugal units of industrialized societies, so that they do not adequately explain the extremely diverse and complex household and family systems found in Third World societies. Consequently, our understanding of the dynamics of female employment in these societies remains patchy.

None of the studies under review analyze female wage employment in Eastern, Central and Southern Africa for any period. The papers discussing urban women in Parpart and Staudt, and White's book, focus primarily on prostitution in the former settler colonies of eastern and Southern Africa. The argument is made that because urban wage labour opportunities for women were negligible in these countries until after the Second World War, prostitution offered women a chance, in the words of Fatton, to carve 'a niche as petty-bourgeois accumulators by providing reproductive labour ser-

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42 Lazreg, *op.cit.*, p.185.

43 Sharon Stichter, 'Women, Employment and the Family: Current Debates', in Stichter and Parpart (eds.).

vices to migrant workers'. It was the primary means by which many African women 'established themselves as integral parts of the emerging urban petty bourgeoisie during the twenty-five to thirty-five years of the twentieth century.[44] The thesis of prostitution as a means of petty-bourgeois accumulation for African women is fully developed by White.

White's book synthesizes and expands on a series she published in the 1980s. It argues that prostitution was reproductive work, a form of family labour, not an activity to be decried in the moralistic language of deviancy, degradation, and depravity. She distinguishes three main forms of prostitution, each of which has 'its own characteristics, behaviour, rate of accumulation, and organization of labour time.[45] First, there was the *watembezi* form, akin to streetwalking. The second was the *malaya* form, in which the prostitute stayed inside her room and waited for men to come to her. Finally, there was the *wazi-wazi* form whereby women sat outside the doors of their rooms or on the porches and called out for men.

The study meticulously delineates the emergence, growth, and transformation of each form, the social and ethnic origins of its practitioners, their relationships with their communities and neighbourhoods, and their earnings and investment strategies. These processes are linked to housing arrangements and policies, changes in the colonial economy, fluctuations in male wages, patterns of labour stabilization, and the eruptions of the two world wars and the Mau Mau war of national liberation. She demonstrates that the colonial state was not opposed to prostitution, although it tried to control it. But state control over the city and prostitution, or over urban space and working class reproduction, was far weaker than is often assumed. White also sketches the solidarities and antagonisms among women engaged in the different forms of prostitution, the development of new family formations around them, and the constructions of ethnicity and sexuality, religion and respectability, class and feminist consciousness.

She writes well and persuasively. But appearances can be deceiving. She extols oral sources, but provides no list of the interviews she conducted. She seeks to offer a radical reinterpretation of Kenyan economic and social history, but often lapses into the colonial language of 'tribes' and 'detribalization'. The distinctions between the various forms of prostitution, and the changes that they underwent, are sometimes given a sharpness and temporal exactness that appears contrived. For example, the evidence is not compelling that *wazi-wazi* did not exist 'before 1936',[46] or that malaya women had 'begun to ask for payment in advance' by 1933, as compared to

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44 Fatton, *op.cit.*, p.32.
45 White, *op.cit.*, p.13.
46 *Ibid.*, p.104.

before when they asked for payment after rendering their services.[47] Indeed, the author is forced to abandon discussing each form distinctively for the post-war period, arguing that 'after 1946 it is really not useful to examine the forms of prostitution individually; instead; post-war Nairobi had a fluidity - of streetwalkers, customers, and absentee landlords - that gave the regional variations of prostitution within the African locations a meaning they had not had since the 1920s'.[48]

There are several key planks of the analysis that do not stand up to closer scrutiny. She argues that Kenya's first prostitutes were from the pastoral communities devastated by the ecological disasters of the late nineteenth century. That may be true. But no concrete evidence is presented to support the assertion that women from these societies used their earnings to replenish their father's households' livestock. The contention that women 'from households engaged in subsistence farming... practised the malaya form', while those who chose the wazi-wazi form 'were generally women from families engaged in cash crop production'[49] also lacks substantiation, apart from the problem of defining what is meant by subsistence farming. And how sustainable was the prostitutes' accumulation? According to her own evidence few women who entered prostitution after the Second World War were able 'to build a house with [their] earnings.[50]

White seems so anxious to celebrate prostitutes that she sees prostitution everywhere in colonial Nairobi. She summons us to 'recognize working prostitutes as Kenya's urban pioneers, the first urban residents'.[51] Whatever happened to the residents of Mombasa, that ancient city on the Kenyan coast? White's prostitutes were strong, enterprising women. They were victims neither of pimps, nor weak, dysfunctional families. Indeed, they were dutiful daughters, driven to prostitution out of loyalty to their families, to support rural production and accumulation. Their activities had little to do with 'sex ratios' in Nairobi,[52] and did not depend 'on men's needs but on the women's labour form'.[53] They were not unduly worried about diseases and violence, for they were in control of their lives. There is no moral ambiguity here, little sense of the way the wider society perceived prostitution. Were the rural families from which the prostitutes came only concerned about their daughters' earnings? If prostitution was new, as we are told, it

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47 *Ibid.*, p.84.
48 *Ibid.*, p.195.
49 *Ibid.*, p.125.
50 *Ibid.*, p.202.
51 *Ibid.*, p.34.
52 *Ibid.*, p.58.
53 *Ibid.*, p.225.

surely must have elicited strong cultural responses. This is a laudable defence of prostitutes that turns into an idealistic defence of prostitution.

There is a split in the feminist literature on the acceptability of prostitution. Some see prostitutes as agents and prostitution simply as work, while others view prostitutes as victims and sex work as the highest form of patriarchal oppression. White would seem to belong to the first group. It is true the usual condemnations of prostitution are often misguided. Certainly, danger, injury, and indignity are not confined to prostitution. Neither is the lack of choice and the presence of coercion, nor the surrender of personal power and control and loss of independence. Similarly, indignity and non-reciprocity are not unique to prostitution. Prostitution is objectionable because, as one author so aptly puts it, it 'is an inherently unequal practice defined by the intersection of capitalism and patriarchy. Prostitution epitomizes men's dominance: it is a practice that is constructed by and reinforces male supremacy, which both creates and legitimizes the "needs" that prostitution appears to satisfy as well as it perpetuates the systems and practices that permit sex work to flourish under capitalism. What is bad about prostitution, then, does not just reside in the sexual exchanges themselves, or in the circumstances in which they take place, but in capitalist patriarchy itself'.[54]

From White's book one would be forgiven to conclude that Kenyan women in colonial Nairobi were all prostitutes. No serious effort is made to trace the development of women's wage labour and other types of informal sector activities, such as beer brewing, food processing, and trade. There are fleeting allusions to women wage employment in 1937 and 1944.[55] Surely by 1963, when Kenya got its independence and White ends her story, wage employment opportunities for women were not as limited as they were in 1937 and 1944. Admittedly, this is a study on prostitution, but prostitution emerged and grew in the context of the changing economic and labour market opportunities for women, just as it was influenced by many other changes in Kenya's political economy that White chooses to discuss. What is the difference between these analyses that privilege prostitution, and colonialist views which portrayed African women as nothing but a bunch of prostitutes? Jacobs even makes the inane assertion that in contemporary Zimbabwe 'for women, urban life is still associated with prostitution'.[56]

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54 Christine Overall, 'What's Wrong with Prostitution? Evaluating Sex Work', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 17, No. 4, Summer 1992: 724. Also see, Carole S Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, Boston, 1984.

55 White, *op.cit.*, p.98, 152.

56 Jacobs, *op.cit.*, p.164.

The papers by Mbilinyi and Hansen show that women in the colonial cities of Eastern and Southern Africa were indeed involved in activities other than prostitution. Mbilinyi examines beer brewing in Dar es Salaam in the 1930s, and women's struggles to retain their control over this industry. She argues that beer brewing was part and parcel of the dynamic and resilient informal sector, or what she calls 'the off-the-books' sector, which provided income generating opportunities for both men and women who could not find permanent employment. The struggle over beer brewing between women and the state was not simply over revenues and accumulation, but also competing gender constructions, and of women's place in the city, which was deemed by colonial ideologies to be for non-Africans, males, and wage workers. Women in the city were disproved of, except for prostitutes, who were grudgingly tolerated because in the official view, prostitution 'was a necessary amenity in the township which provided a diversion otherwise filled by more political forms of action'.[57] This underscores the fact that the state treated African women differently according to their particular class and specific occupational category. In the end, the women won their struggle against the state over beer brewing by effectively mobilizing their formal networks and tapping community support. Their struggle reinforced the oppositional ideology of popular culture.

Hansen notes that married African women, together with single women, in colonial Lusaka monopolized the sale of home-brewed beer and alcohol, and traded in prepared foods as well. These women were attempting to accumulate capital and at the same time challenging the gender definitions and demands of colonial and indigenous cultures. Although the bulk of the paper deals with Lusaka women traders in the 1970s and 1980s, it shows that these women did not spring out of nowhere. They have a history, one which they made, despite restrictions imposed by a colonial state with settlerist pretensions. From the mid-1970s when the bottom fell out of copper prices, the country's main export, the Zambian economy entered a period of severe crisis and the state was forced by the mighty IMF and World Bank to undertake structural adjustment programs. These developments facilitated the rapid growth of what Hansen calls the 'black market' and reduced state intrusiveness into the activities of women traders, and recast gender struggles within households.

Whose Voice?

Parpart begins her paper on southern Nigerian female workers with a brief comment on the clashes between western feminists and Third World women at a number of forums on the construction of the gender debate. The latter,

57 Mbilinyi, *op.cit.*, p.116.

she avers, 'rejected western feminists' preoccupation with patriarchy and insisted that global inequities, not men, were the main enemy facing Third World women... The force of these arguments', she continues, 'alarmed western feminists, many of whom drew back from the apparently dangerous business of cross-cultural feminist analysis'.[58] The issue, however, goes far beyond the question of 'cross-cultural feminist analysis'. It is about power: who sets the agenda? Who speaks for Third World Women?

The studies under review point to a disturbing reality in studies on African women. The voices of African women themselves are largely absent. In the three collections analyzed above there are only three papers by African women that I could identify out of 26 contributions. The Editors of the *Signs* collection justify the absence of papers from African women scholars with a long self-serving litany bemoaning the fact that the 'prevailing scioeconomic conditions in African universities are not conducive to the production of knowledge'; 'scholars situated in impoverished or beleaguers institutions lack the time or resources... to produce scholarly work'; 'African men are more likely to go to the university and become researchers than are African women'; 'the few women scholars situated in African universities often lack a supportive environment to do critical feminist work'.[59] The list goes on. This is the language of exclusion, of privilege and power, of intellectual imperialism.

I simply cannot believe that they could not find a single African woman scholar who could have written a piece of 'critical feminist work' for this issue. I just know too many able African women scholars in various parts of the continent to believe such balderdash. Yes, there are African women scholars who do research and write against great odds. And who said that 'knowledge' can only be produced in comfortable surroundings, from the ivory towers of American universities? This is the voice of an arrogant, institutionalized American feminism. It fits into an old pattern. In an insightful paper on intellectual practices and the production of knowledge in African studies, Imam and Mama note the curious fact that 'it is possible to have, as recently as the last five years, at least three books which are collections of articles on African women, which appear to have no contributions at all from an African researcher... or, a review article on studies of African women published in 1987 in which possibly 15 articles by African women were referenced (out of maybe 100?) and where AAWORD (the Association

58 Parpart, *op.cit.*, p.161.
59 Editorial, *op.cit.*, p.645.

of African Women for Research and Development) was mentioned favourably, none of its published papers were'.[60]

The rationalizations contained in the *Signs* editorial remind me of the British colonial practice, whereby Africans used to be represented in some Legislative Councils (Legco) by a European, usually a missionary. It was believed the 'natives' could not speak for themselves. They were simple, illiterate people, who did not understand the workings of government. The educated elite among them were too busy scheming or aping the European to understand the 'native' mind. But the missionaries did. After all, they dealt in souls. As true representatives of the 'natives', the Europeans would periodically ask their hapless wards to submit memoranda listing their concerns, which the Europeans would sometimes table in Legco.

Traditions die hard. The colonial tradition of Europeans representing Africans lives on in African studies and the *Signs* collection. After feasting on the 'critical feminist work' of North American feminists, we are given light African dessert consisting of 'Reports From Four Women's Groups in Africa'.[61] We are told this project was four years in the making. And yet, all the Africans could produce were reports informing the North American feminist fraternity that they have been keeping busy. That they are trying. And so the Africanist feminists can feel good about themselves. They have magnanimously given the 'natives' a chance to speak. Like the colonial missionaries, Africanists often act like evangelists out to save some benighted souls. They see themselves as not simply writing *about* Africa and Africans as, say, an American scholar might write about China and the Chinese, but

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60 Ayesha M Imam and Amina Mama, 'The Role of Academics in Limiting and Expanding Academic Freedom', paper presented to the CODESRIA Symposium on Academic Freedom Research and the Social Responsibility of the Intellectual in Africa, Kampala, Uganda, 26-29 November, 1990. The three books they refer to are: Margaret J Hay and Sharon Stichter, eds., *African Women South of the Sahara*, Harlow: Longman, 1984; Claire Robertson and Iris Berger, eds., *Women and Class in Africa*, New York: Africana, 1986; and Sharon Stichter and Jane L Parpart, eds., *Patriarchy and Class: African Women in the Home and the Workforce*, Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1988. The review article is by Claire Robertson, 'Developing Economic Awareness: Changing Perspectives in Studies of African Women 1976-1985', *Feminist Studies* 13, No. 1, 1987: 97-135. The same observation could be made of the *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 22, No. 3, 1988, Special Issue on *Current Research on African Women*. None of the 15 articles and 'research notes' were written by Africans. Reading the articles and perishing through their bibliographies one would think there is hardly any gender research being conducted by African scholars, both within and outside the continent.

61 See pp.846-869.

as seers writing *for* Africans. The feminist Africanists in these collections are following a well trodden path.[62]

The tensions and conflicts that Parpart talks are not simply between 'western feminists' and 'Third World women', for neither group is homogeneous. There are many feminisms, diverse women's voices in both the so-called western world and the Third World. The 'western feminism' Parpart is talking about is white-middle class academic feminism. These feminists are as disconnected from the realities of the African women as they are from the realities of racial minorities in North America, including women of African descent. In recent years the 'women of colour', as the racial minority women are sometimes called, (as if the women of European descent have no colour), have been vigorously challenging the right of white-middle class women to speak for them and define their agenda.[63] The hegemony of western white middle class academic feminists over Africa should also be challenged, together with all forms of western intellectual hegemony. The endeavours to gender African history, and African studies generally, must continue. But let African feminist scholars speak for themselves.

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62 I have dealt with the question of the intellectual division of labour between Africanists and Africans in African studies and the former's domination of publication outlets and theoretical work, and the material and ideological conditions that sustain this dependent and asymmetrical relationship in 'African Social Scientists and the Struggle for Academic Freedom', in *Journal of Eastern African Research and Development* 22, 1992. Also see Thandika Mkandawire, 'Problems and Prospects of the Social Sciences in Africa', *Eastern Africa Social Science Research Review* 5, No. 1, 1989.

63 See Maxine Baca Zinn, et al., 'The Costs of Exclusionary Practices in Women's Studies,' in Elizabeth Minnich, et al., eds., *Reconstructing the Academy: Women's Education and Women's Studies.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988; Bell Hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*; Mary Childers and Bell Hooks, 'A Conversation about Race and Class', in Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn F Keller, eds., *Conflicts in Feminism.* New York and London: Routledge, 1990. Also see the anguished debate between white women and 'women of colour' in *Feminist Review*, Nos. 22 and 23, 1986.