

# Gender Relations and Sustainable Agriculture

## *Rural Women's Resistance to Structural Adjustment in Kenya*

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*Les fermières de Maragua au Kenya se sentent exploitées et tentent d'y mettre fin, tant au niveau familial, que national et international.*

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This study examines gendered class struggle in Maragua, Kenya. Women in the community are reorganizing their relationships to avoid export crops and to emphasize subsistence and ecological reclamation. We consider developments in the decade 1986–1996. In 1986 the government of Kenya accepted an International Monetary Fund (IMF) program which featured export crop expansion and privatization. By 1996 the government was imposing the program in a setting of regional armed conflict.

Bina Agarwal has come to the conclusion that dispossessed women need independent rights to land. This is our starting point. How have women cultivators organized to gain rights to land? Are there lessons to be learned and applied elsewhere?

The study is also an attempt by East African and North American women to join in a search for routes to justice through gendered class struggle. The intensified internationalism that has come with neoliberal globalization can empower dispossessed women and men who recognize that successful struggle requires international coordination. Neoliberalism creates conditions which make it both possible and necessary to build international alliances. This study is a contribution toward efforts to inform ourselves and others, because an understanding of the realities of resistance to neoliberalism is one step in the forging of solidarity. We query the development policies which predicate "food security" on increased export crop production and reliance on imported foodstuffs. Contrary to this commodified process of production promoted by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and government institutions such as Britain's Overseas Development Institute, women farmers in Maragua who rejected coffee production, demonstrate that a sustenance economy of locally grown and traded foodstuffs is the only effective means of creating food security.

We suggest four means through which international solidarity might be furthered. First, taxpayers in donor countries might mobilize to influence government policy makers to desist from promoting export crop production as a means of reaching food security. Following on the excellent example of gendered resistance that Maragua women provide, citizens of donor countries could instead support a sustenance development model similar to that devised by Maragua's banana growers. Second, organizations and individuals worldwide could advance the self-sufficiency of African women small-scale farmers by opposing military and "humanitarian" interventions, which, we contend, serve to ravage food production and local trade by small farmers in an effort to protect and expand the export operations of multinational corporations. Third, consumers could organize a coffee boycott to deny business to corporations which spearhead the exploitative relations of coffee production. Fourth, ordinary people might emulate, in their own countries, the Maragua women's efforts towards local self-sufficiency in food, health care, and other social services.

### Theorizing gendered struggle

In theorizing rural women's struggles we draw on Turner and Benjamin's argument that

individuals and groups who directly produce the majority of the goods and services needed for the production of their own labor power and the labor power of others, have a direct interest in preventing capitalist commodification of communal relationships, natural environments, and public space. (211)

This theoretical framework stands against both social movement theorists and their critics (Laclau and Mouffe; Wood) who, despite their differences, agree that capitalist relations of production are confined to the waged work place. In contrast, we centralize a global struggle of the unwaged "in which women in general, as well as women and men among groups of peasants, indigenous peoples, squatters, migrant laborers, and other diverse subject groups have emerged as the central protagonists" (Turner and Benjamin 211).

Our theoretical perspective relates structural adjustment's privatization or "enclosures" to an antithesis, a change from exploitative social relations to communal, egalitarian social relations. We focus on exploited women who try to transform society by reconstructing relations with men, with the state, and with global capital.

A "gendered class analysis" highlights the reciprocal

nature of interactions between the classes comprised of people of specific ethnicities and genders. It also underlines how capitalists themselves seek to strengthen bonds with categories of exploited men who are instrumentalized to control their wives' labour and redirect that labour to activities that will generate more profit for capital. This

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"male deal" between husbands and capitalists in turn contributes to impelling transformative activities by exploited women. Finally, a gendered class analysis is distinctive in that it encompasses the breakup of the cross-class "male deal" and the forging of cross-gender alliances amongst the exploited, against class antagonists, aimed at creating new, humane social relations. Gendered class analysis, then, explains the links between unwaged women, their husbands, state officials, and members of the global capitalist class. Further, the links illuminate the power relations between capital and unwaged women labourers as these links are mediated by husbands and the state. The need for a means of interpreting and strengthening the social power of dispossessed people worldwide is addressed, we contend, by the development of a gendered class analysis. Such analysis is feminist if we understand feminism to mean a recognition that most women are exploited and a commitment to overcoming that exploitation.

**Maragua: women farmers replace coffee with bananas**

"Every woman belongs to at least one woman's group," Alexiah Kamene told us as if it were the most obvious fact of life. Kamene is a widow who lives in Maragua and grows bananas and vegetables on her one acre (0.4 ha) farm. She works part-time as a domestic servant and hires herself out seasonally with a group of other women to weed or harvest in the gardens of farmers with larger holdings.

*Banana money is better than coffee money. Men do still take the money from women. Single women manage better. You will find that banana traders are mainly divorced or widowed women.*

Kamene described the situation in Maragua as she sees it. It is not a utopia for women who do not own land. But it is better than it was ten years ago when dutiful and unwaged women picked coffee which fetched incomes for their husbands, state officials, and international merchants. Since 1986 Maragua farming women have taken steps towards a new organization of society in which they, as producers, manage resources, outputs, and incomes.

Maragua lies in the middle of a coffee zone, about 80 kilometres northwest of Nairobi, Kenya's capital. Maragua Location, a part of Kigumo Division, covers about 220 square miles. Approximately 100,000 people live there. (Republic of Kenya). Husbands own most of the small, one to five acre (0.4–2 ha) farms in Maragua. Technically and legally, their wives are landless. In practice, peasant women in central Kenya have customarily had the right to work on their husbands' farms and control the use of foodstuffs they themselves produced. Women cultivators have historically belonged to collective work groups which applied themselves to large tasks on each other's food plots. However, these groups never worked on men's cash crop plots since the income from cash crops did not cater to women's needs. Wives worked individually, with children or with casual labourers, on husbands' cash crop plots, but did not control the yield.

At independence in 1963 the government of Kenya lifted colonial restrictions on coffee growing by Africans. In the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s, coffee production on small holdings provided farmers with substantial incomes, and provided the state with more foreign exchange than any other commodity. In the last half of the 1970s coffee began to lose its attraction to producers. State corruption swallowed sales income so producers were not paid fairly or promptly. Between 1980 and 1990 real international prices for Africa's coffee exports fell by 70 per cent (World Bank).

By 1986 Kenyan farmers had faced ten years of declining income from coffee. Increasing numbers of women coffee cultivators received nothing from the coffee payments which the government remitted to male landowners. Oral testimony and direct experience confirm that increasing numbers of women threatened to stop caring for their husbands' coffee. Some men responded by declaring that if their wives would not work, they would chase the women away from the farms. Government chiefs intervened to mediate between embattled wives and husbands. The chiefs sought to preserve both the marriages and the coffee production, and thereby safeguard the profits on which government revenues depended and on which were premised debt repayment and continued

good relations with the International Monetary Fund and Paris Club of donors.

By 1986 the contradiction between female coffee workers and male coffee farm owners contributed to a situation of declining overall production (Mgendi 1996a; 1996b). In response to lower coffee export earnings the World Bank and IMF provided funds to increase coffee production. The government raised coffee payments to encourage husbands to defend the industry by forcing recalcitrant wives back to work in coffee. The IMF also introduced cost-sharing in health and education which created a greater need amongst producers for cash. This need constituted a coercive incentive to resume the production of cash crops. In effect, the IMF mounted formidable obstacles to women's efforts to refuse coffee production by first, introducing incentives in the form of conditional loans to the state and second, by requiring the state to pay higher coffee prices to men.

Despite the harsher discipline faced by women in their households, many of those who refused to produce coffee resolved to stay with their husbands and preserve their marriages. But the women planted beans between the coffee trees, contrary to restrictions against intercropping with coffee. They thus provided their families with food and began the tedious process of renourishing the chemically damaged soil. But this was not enough. Their husbands and state officials stood in the way of women's needs to produce food and secure cash income. Finally, the women took drastic action. In Maragua and elsewhere in Kenya, women uprooted coffee trees and used them for firewood. The penalty for damaging a coffee tree was imprisonment for seven years. By late 1986 most women farmers in Maragua had planted bananas and vegetables for home consumption and local trade instead of coffee for export. This pattern was repeated with varying intensity throughout Kenya and the East and Central African regions as a whole.

The women's dramatic attack on the coffee trees broke and restructured long-standing social relationships at three levels. First, the Maragua insurgents shifted effective control over resources from their husbands into their own hands. Second, they broke their relationships of debt peonage and subjection to the state coffee apparatus and established an alternative self-regulated banana trade. They also contributed to forcing the single party state to



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legalize opposition parties.<sup>1</sup> Third, the Maragua women extracted themselves from state-mediated relationships with foreign suppliers of agro-chemical inputs and a global coffee market which enriched commercial traders at the expense of producers.

Sir Roger Swynnerton was a colonial agricultural planner based in East Africa in the 1950s. In a 1985 interview he provided, from his imperial perspective, an unacknowledged gendered class analysis which hints at the historical practices reflected in the women's uprooting of coffee trees. According to Swynnerton,

In Kenya twice a year we called our provincial agricultural officers together for a conference to discuss programs.... About the middle of the 1950s, one of our subjects of discussion was whether we should push for crop specialization in different areas of the country ... leaving food crop areas to produce the subsistence requirements of the cash crop areas. One very experienced provincial agricultural officer said this just would not work. The African was so inured to securing his food supplies that when the first rain started pattering on the roof of his hut, the wife in her sleep would reach over on one side and pick up a hoe, the other side to pick up a bag of seed and in the middle of the night she would go out and start planting food. In no way would she stop doing that whatever the cash crop being grown. (Swynnerton qtd. in Bryceson 17)

By and large, in Maragua in 1986, the typical working man "secured his food supplies" by participating in his wives' rejection of coffee. Husbands recognized that their wives' resistance contributed funds and organizational militancy which allowed men to hold onto their land in the midst of expanding and accelerating large scale enclosures. In addition the women reinstated producer control over land. Furthermore, they re-established and strengthened their collective women's work groups which form the basis for many activities such as savings and credit "merry-go-rounds." In the merry-go-rounds, each woman in the group contributes a small sum of money into a "pot" every week and every week, a different member receives the pot. She typically uses her share to pay school fees or to buy household utensils or a goat.

In 1996 the IMF loaned 12 billion Kenyan shillings

(U.S.\$218m/or Cdn\$299m)<sup>2</sup> to the Kenya government, earmarked for the "full commercialization" of agriculture with emphasis on export crops.<sup>3</sup> Though Maragua farmers escaped the exploitation of the coffee market, the alternative they built exists within the framework of an increasingly privatized and commodified society. The state and multinational corporations continue to regulate working women's labour by giving credit to (male) title deed holders to encourage horticulture. Foreign and local capitalists entice landowning men in Maragua into labour intensive and chemical dependent export production. Husbands of women who have rejected coffee may view horticulture as a means to reassert command over women's labour. Meanwhile, the state upholds laws which favour men.<sup>4</sup>

### Conclusion

In the past decade, many farming women from Maragua and elsewhere in Kenya have attempted to gain control over land for food production. They have confronted the state, corporations, and often, their own husbands. The relations of production imposed upon producers by capital and the state have organized dispossessed women to resist. They began by refusing the discipline meted out by husbands who sought high returns on the crops women produce. While the IMF is stepping up pressure to privatize state assets, including coffee marketing bodies, women producers are creating an alternative to corporate takeover. Many have revived customary women's work groups. Through these self-organized and autonomous groups the women have begun to reconstruct a sustenance society, for instance, through rebuilding a regional trade and subsistence system.

Three lessons that might be taken from the experience of women cultivators in Maragua are, first, that capital organizes women to break exploitative relationships with men and then to join with other women to pursue common class objectives which are shared by people of different ethnicities. The emphasis in structural adjustment programs on increased coffee exports meant that husbands pressured women to divert more land and labour away from food production. Corrupt government officials and husbands appropriated most of the coffee money. As a result, very little reached the women producers, who were therefore unable to feed and educate their children. On the other hand, women and their families belonged to coffee cooperative societies. Women's affiliation in the co-ops laid a basis for the development of a common response to their exploitation. Together, women intercropped, refused to work on coffee, and finally uprooted the trees. When women replaced coffee with bananas, they broke an individualized labour process organized by husbands and re-established a collective production process organized by their own work groups. Resistance against the coffee industry, as manifest in women's work groups in Maragua, cut across ethnic boundaries.

A second lesson relates to the fragility of men's alliances with state officials and international capital. When wives refused to produce coffee, the fragile "male deal" between husbands, the state, and capital, dissolved. The myth of the male breadwinner was exposed. The Maragua study suggests that working-class men's abdication of domination over women workers and wives not only extends the scope of all workers' initiatives to control resources but also break hierarchical relationships which keep women and men producers hungry, enslaved to capital and repressed by dictatorship. In repudiating the "male deal," peasant men positioned themselves to work in a gendered class alliance with women in their mutual interests.

A third lesson involves the movement of women cultivators into direct confrontation with international capital. Our analysis confirms the insight that neoliberal government functionaries predicate their structural adjustment programs on the effectiveness of husbands' discipline over wives' labour. Those women who reject this discipline do so through a transformative process which starts by satisfying the needs of the dispossessed. This undercuts a crucial source of ethnic antagonisms: competition amongst factions of the exploited for resources which are dominated by capital. In repudiating gendered exploitation, women cultivators in Maragua, Kenya go beyond neo-liberalism and the ethnicized violence through which it is imposed.

Structural adjustment's insistence on more cash crop production for export combined with untrammelled private appropriation of the commons and public property under the rubric of neoliberal privatization has thrown small-scale farmers, who are overwhelmingly women, up against an array of class enemies. These disguise the complex gendered class struggles as "tribalism," while inviting militarization and debilitating "aid" from interests which are fully committed to rapid structural adjustment. The original challenge in the mid-1980s by women cultivators, such as those in Maragua, to exploitation mediated by their husbands has evolved into a confrontation with the forces of globalizing capital a decade later.

In the future two patterns are likely to unfold. First, women can be expected to coordinate their actions regionally and internationally to a much greater extent and with the involvement of allied men. And second, the militarization of the region by international capital can be expected to increase.

Maragua women's struggles for sustainable agriculture stand as evidence of the real reasons for "humanitarian intervention." They call for a response of solidarity from people elsewhere to resist military reconquest of Africa and to stand with the women farmers as they resist neoliberal enclosures by fighting to replace export crops with food production.

International solidarity can be built by strengthening local networks for self-sufficiency in food and social services. Consumer boycotts of coffee, beef, sugar, flowers, and other export commodities could be used to put

pressure on corporations which seek to decrease the farmland under food. Alliances could also be strengthened by people globally who demand that taxpayer's money support sustenance food production and local trade as opposed to militarization, export agriculture, and corporate food monopoly. In efforts to build global and local self-sufficiency, the Maragua women's initiative can provide important lessons for success elsewhere.

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<sup>1</sup>In the town of Sagana, near Maragua town, small business women refused to deliver coffee to government buyers and simultaneously demanded that the KANU regime repeal section 2(A) of the Kenya Constitution which outlawed opposition political parties. When the coffee industry collapsed the Paris Club of donors, in 1991, ordered Kenya's President Moi to legalize multi-party democracy. He complied in 1992 (Zawadi Women's Group).

<sup>2</sup>In 1996 KSh55.05 = U.S.\$1.00 and U.S.\$1.00 = Cdn\$1.37.

<sup>3</sup>The President of Kenya, Daniel arap Moi, in October 1996 launched an agriculture policy paper aimed at "enabling the sector to run as a fully commercial enterprise" ("Government Plans Fundamental Reforms for Agriculture" 1-2).

<sup>4</sup>Currently, the Constitution of Kenya does not outlaw discrimination based on sex. The hardships which selective enforcement of certain aspects of "customary law" impose on women are illustrated by the following two examples: "Two elderly widows in Matungulu Division, Machakos District have accused a chief of grabbing their land," ("Widows: Chief Has Taken Our Land" 16); "Three widows of late top civil servant Hezekiah Oyugi went to court yesterday seeking orders to block his two elder sons from allegedly plundering his estate ... two of the wives are likely to be evicted 'any time now' from their matrimonial homes by the two sons," (Kaona 1); see also Okello.

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