

Day 10: The Recivilization of Men by Women

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The agrarian transition to an input-intensive, capitalized form of agriculture is deeply gendered. Food security depends on combating overt discrimination against women, but this shall only be viable if combined with a redistribution of roles in the household.

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The agrarian transition is a complex process characterized by an accelerated switch to an input-intensive, capitalized form of agriculture and a growing importance of global value chains and of export-led agriculture. It results in increased land concentration, massive rural-to-urban migration, and the depopulation of rural areas.

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This transition is deeply gendered. First, the general trend has been for men to migrate first, for longer periods and to destinations farther away. There are exceptions to this pattern. In Sri Lanka and in the Philippines for instance, female migrants formed respectively three quarters and over half of outgoing migrants in recent years -- often to become domestic workers or sex workers, or to work in the garment industry in a heavily segmented employment market. In general however, it is the men rather than the women who are likely to abandon agricultural work at home and seek income in other sectors, in part because of social norms concerning gender roles, and in part because of the higher levels of education, on average, of men, that allow them to seek off-farm employment.

"Men are likely to abandon agricultural work at home and leave women behind to carry the full burdens of agricultural production"

Women then are then left behind to carry the full burdens of agricultural production. They may be supported in this regard by the receipt of remittances, which can serve to buy inputs or hire labour for the performance of the heavier tasks, such as land preparation, that are not generally seen as suitable for women: this appears to be quite common in South East Asia, where the productivity of land could be maintained in part thanks to such remittances.

But women often have little legal protection or rights to property ownership, and they face cultural and social norms that are obstacles to their ability to improve productivity. In addition, they may find it difficult to reconcile their role as small-scale food producers with their responsibilities in the "care" economy, an obstacle male agricultural producers do not face. These responsibilities reduce the mobility of women, which affects their ability to market their produce; and they result in time poverty for women and a shortage of labour on the land.

Against this background, concerns have been expressed about the impact the feminization of agriculture may have on local food security, if, due to the obstacles they face, women are less productive than men. In 2010, the [Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations](http://www.fao.org/index_en.htm) (http://www.fao.org/index_en.htm) (FAO) famously **concluded** (<http://www.fao.org/publications/sofa/en/>) that "if women had the same access to productive resources as men, they could increase yields on their farms by 20–30 percent. This could raise total agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5–4 percent, which could in turn reduce the number of hungry people in the world by 12–17 percent.

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Whatever the validity of this calculation, the reality is that food security today depends, more even than in the past, on combating discrimination against women, in order to allow women and female-headed farming households to produce under better conditions.

The agrarian transition is also gendered in a second way. An increasing proportion of women have taken up waged employment on large farms, in many cases replacing men who have moved to non-agricultural employment. The growth in the proportion of women employed as agricultural workers occurs at a time when non-traditional agricultural exports are rising, especially horticultural products. New jobs are created in cut flowers and in vegetable growing and packing: these are "high-value" products, because they require special handling or some processing, which adds substantive value beyond the farmgate.

For employers, recruiting women into these relatively labor-intensive types of production presents a number of advantages. Women are considered more docile than men, and more reliable. The nature of the tasks in the emerging export sectors -- fruits and vegetables in particular -- are generally

physically less demanding and do not require the use of heavy machinery, and are therefore seen as suitable for women. The wages of women are generally lower than those of men, which employers sometimes justify by the consideration that they are not, typically, the main wage-earners within the family; for the same reason, women are considered a highly flexible workforce, which can be hired on a weekly or seasonal basis.

There occurs what might be called an "internal segmentation" in most high-value agriculture. On these farms, one relatively stable and qualified segment of the workforce coexists with another segment, made up of unskilled workers, often recruited at certain points in the year only, and often as casual workers, without a formal contract of employment.

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The pressure to maintain such a dualized system, even as technological advances have made production less dependent on seasonality, can be explained as the result of globalization and the need to "rationalize" (i.e. make more profitable) workforce management. That also explains why jobs in the "periphery" part of the workforce are classified as seasonal or temporary, even when they may in fact be continuous. Typically, women are disproportionately over-represented in this "periphery" segment, rather than in the "core" segment of permanently employed workers.

Women's rights must be given a central place in the agrarian transition if it is to be reconciled with rural development and the reduction of rural poverty. As independent, small-scale producers on family farms, women must have recognized access to land and other productive inputs. They must be supported by extension services which provide gender-aware advice and whose personnel better represents women. And they must be encouraged to organize themselves into cooperatives that allow them not only to produce better by achieving certain economies of scale, but also to have access to group insurance mechanisms and financial services, and to have a political voice.

As waged agricultural workers, women on farms must be protected from the various forms of discrimination they currently are subjected to. Such discrimination takes a variety of forms, including an over-representation of women working under temporary contracts or hired without any formal contract; a failure to provide women with protective gear against pesticides; a refusal by employers to hire women who are pregnant, leading seasonal pregnant workers to sometimes hide their pregnancy in order to maintain their access to incomes; and an exposure of women to domestic violence because they cannot move away from the plantation.

Setting wages on a piece-work basis (by volume or by surface area), generally disfavours women, since the pay is calculated on the basis of male productivity standards. One consequence of this system is that it encourages women, to have their children work with them as "helpers," in order to perform the task faster: this is one of the reasons why so many children are employed in agriculture.

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However, the feminization of agriculture raises questions that go beyond the discrete forms of discrimination they are subjected to and that human rights must guard against. The fundamental question is how the increased role of women in agriculture shall be reconciled with their role in the "care" economy (the minding and education of children, or the care of the elderly and the sick), as well as with the household chores for which, in all regions, they remain chiefly responsible -- the purchasing and preparation of food, laundry, or collection of firewood or water.

This is work that is essential not only to the health and nutrition of family members, but also to the maintenance of the agricultural workforce. Yet it is work that is unremunerated, unrecognized, and largely invisible, because it is work done by women.

It is important to invest in services and infrastructure that reduce the burden this represents for women -- for example, by childcare services in rural areas or by water pipes linking villages to water sources. As we think of how to support rural development, we must recognize the importance of this "care" economy as a vital adjuvant to the "market" economy -- and we must, for instance, adapt how extension workers provide advice or how employment on farms is organized, to fit the responsibilities women assume within the household.

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But the reduction of household chores and recognition of them will not be sufficient. We also must redistribute roles within the household: we need to ensure that men, too, contribute their part to the "care" economy, and that the gendered division of roles is destabilized and transformed. The feminization of agriculture shall only be viable if it is combined with such a redefinition of responsibilities. Rather than men remaining exclusively focused on income generating activities while leaving to women to perform all the unremunerated tasks that are essential to the market itself, we need to rebalance the respective contributions of both. What is required is the recivilizing of men by women.

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