



Gender and generational patterns of African deagrarianization: Evolving labour and land allocation in smallholder peasant household farming, 1980–2015

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ABSTRACT

This article traces smallholder peasant household production and reproduction trends against the background of profound change in African agriculture's terms of trade between 1980 and 2015. The gender and generational dynamics of African peasant households, which evolved under European colonial policies from the late 19th century and largely persisted in the early post-independence era, were disrupted by the 1970s oil crises. By the 1980s, peasant labor displacement was gaining momentum, as evidenced by declining smallholder commercial agriculture, often but not always accompanied by rural out-migration. Ensuing differentiated involvement of peasant smallholder family members in unfolding processes of deagrarianization and depeasantization are explored on the basis of statistical data and qualitative case studies. The article's broad spatial focus and 35-year overview are accommodated in a human geography methodology, which synthesizes multi-disciplinary social scientists' research findings on the gender/age division of labor, allocation of decision-making power and welfare provisioning patterns within smallholder households. Spatial and temporal analysis of sex/age ratios derived from published data on sectoral labour force participation, quantitative surveys of intra-household labour time allocation and national census population data provide insight into the differential effects of deagrarianization on household members. Salient trends are: labor contraction in male commercial peasant family farming, smallholder subsistence-based land cultivation squeezed by medium-scale commercial farmers, female resource control and labor autonomy continuing to be impinged by male patriarchal attitudes, and an emerging tendency for "older women left behind" in the countryside, who provide an agrarian fallback for returned migrant family members and other members engaged in local non-agricultural occupations needing subsistence food support.

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1. Introduction

The post-colonial history of African smallholder peasantry is viewed through various disciplinary lenses by social scientists. The analysis that follows adopts an inter-disciplinary approach through which research results from anthropologists, sociologists, demographers, economists and political scientists are juxtaposed, underlined and informed by a multi-scaled comparative geograph-

ical approach.¹ My objective is to overview quantitative and qualitative research findings on smallholder peasant household production.

¹ My human geography methodology, centered on analysis of spatial and social processes, is embedded in logical empiricism (Harvey, 1969). Juxtaposing different locational case studies enables geographers to identify spatial inter-relationships and patterns. These findings form the empirical foundation for scaling up to discern and theorize more generalized patterns. In turn, the observation of change in spatial patterns over time facilitates the recognition of significant trends. Whereas economists' specification of variables and controls in modelling exercises imparts a sense of certitude arising from strictly delineated subject matter and precision of statistical measurement, geographical study is more open-ended aimed at ascertaining spatial similarity and difference, starting with the formulation of key variables and the specification of the researchers' premises and vantage point. I am not aiming to construct an economic model or a post-modern metanarrative. Instead this article chronicles changing labor and land allocation associated with evolving peasant household units' productive and reproductive patterns based on the integration of published statistical data and relevant qualitative literature. The resulting analysis is contestable and open to revision in light of enhanced data availability and on-going change.

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This entails comparing temporal and spatial sex ratios and probing qualitative research on reproduction and the intra-household division of labor. The aim is to provide a theorized narrative about changing land and labor allocation by gender and age influenced by processes of deagrarianization and depeasantization.

During the colonial period, African farmers were subjected to pressure, sometimes of a coercive nature to grow cashcrops or migrate to earn cash on plantations or mines, to generate tax revenue for the state. African export crop-producing households were known notably for cocoa and groundnuts in West Africa and coffee, cashew and cotton in East Africa. This continued in the first years of national independence but a turning point came at the beginning of the 1980s, when peasant cashcropping started experiencing a downturn.

For the sake of clarity, the definition of peasant producer refers to domestic family units pursuing agricultural livelihoods, which combine subsistence and commodity production. The family functions as a unit of production, consumption, reproduction, socialization, welfare and risk-spreading in the context of small rural community settings (Shanin, 1976).

Isolating trends in African smallholder peasant agriculture is difficult given that African rural labour statistics lack standardization and rigour. The most reliable agrarian statistics are those of crop export and production, but they generally amalgamate production from small, medium and large-scale producers, masking the differentiated agency of African farm producers. Interpolation of quantitative and qualitative multi-disciplinary research findings focussed on smallholder peasant households and relevant national statistical data sets helps to reveal the nature of motivational agency underlying Sub-Saharan deagrarianization and depeasantization trends in the context of global market fluctuations.

Following the 1973–74 and 1979 global oil crises, national trajectories in Sub-Saharan Africa bifurcated into a few fortunate countries that were oil-rich (Angola, Nigeria, Gabon, Congo and Libya) as opposed to other smallholder peasant cashcropping countries crippled by the oil price rise. The latter experienced rapid slippage in the global competitiveness of their crop exports, triggered by the combination of very high transport costs and the wide geographical dispersal of small household production units across the continent. With the collapse of their export markets, one smallholder farming country after another plunged into debt. World Bank and International Monetary Fund loan support accompanied by structural adjustment debt conditionality imposed swingeing government cutbacks and economic restructuring. On-going agricultural development programmes and Green Revolution-type input subsidies, which many peasant farmers had been availed in the 1970s, were largely phased out (Bryceson, 2009; Byerlee & Eicher, 1997; Havnevik, Bryceson, Birgegård, Matondi, & Beyene, 2007).²

Consequent peasant household income decline catalyzed a revaluation of household assets and alterations in the household division of labor. Peasant family farms shifted away from their dependence on export cashcropping. Household members started individually scrambling to find alternative modes of income earning, often disregarding the direction of patriarchal heads of households, who were powerless in the face of need for new forms of

livelihood for household survival. Family members' coherence as agrarian production units eroded, amidst lineage and household norms being questioned (Bryceson, 2000, 2002a).

The section that follows reviews changing gender patterns in the context of the acceleration of deagrarianization in peasant smallholder households during the 1980s and 1990s associated with global market shocks and widespread implementation of structural adjustment and economic liberalization policies. Section III traces the process into the 2000s at a time when many African countries were stimulated by mineral exports and rising rural-urban inequality. Comparison of labour survey data for select countries reveals country variation in age and gender labour patterns and tendencies over time. Section IV provides an analytical overview of gender-delineated qualitative case studies of changing African rural land and labor allocation and indicators of a growing phenomenon of "older women left behind" as *de facto* female heads of households in the countryside. Section V concludes and summarizes the main tenets of my argument and considers the future trajectory of subsistence smallholder farming.

2. Gender patterns in African Peasantries, 1980s-1990s

Colonial policies re-enforced by post-colonial policies shaped the division between male cashcrop and female subsistence agricultural spheres³, a pattern that meshed with patriarchal family structures (Boserup, 1970; Bryceson, 1995; Rogers, 1980). However, during the 1980s, African smallholder farmers were out of necessity rather than choice reverting to subsistence farming. Men's cashcrop earnings dwindled. Households that had grown accustomed to spending cash on school fees and an increasing proportion of their basic needs, encountered shortfalls in their household finances. A scramble for proliferating alternative sources of income on the part of able-bodied members of the household ensued (Bryceson, 1996, 2002a, 2002b; Ellis, 1998, 2000).

In the process, the gender divide between male agricultural cash earnings and female unremunerated subsistence agricultural work blurred. Men, women and many of their offspring, who would have otherwise attended school, attempted to assemble portfolios of viable livelihood activities. They concentrated on non-agricultural cash generation, setting in train "deagrarianization", defined as a multi-dimensional process of change involving: 1) livelihood reorientation, 2) occupational work adjustment, 3) spatial realignment of residential settlement and 4) social re-identification, constituting movement away from agrarian patterns in local, regional and international economies (Bryceson, 2000). Sectoral transformation, taking the form of deagrarianization began in the 1980s, and continues to the present, evidenced by a declining proportion of the national population and their total labor time engaged in agriculture relative to other sectors of national production (Bryceson, 1996, 1997) (Figs. 1 and 2).

After many decades of commodity-producing peasantry expansion in Sub-Saharan Africa, depeasantization started gaining momentum. "Depeasantization" refers to movement away from rural smallholder commodity-producing family production towards concentration on simple subsistence food production, and/or other forms of labour. This can be agricultural in nature, such as waged or casualized plantation, sharecropping or industrialized farm labor, bonded labor, slavery, etc. or the partial or full abandonment of agricultural production (Bryceson, 2000).

² Byerlee and Eicher (1997: 20) note that 16 African countries reduced or eliminated their maize fertilizer subsidies. The erosion of African farmers' yield improvements was demoralizing (Bryceson, 1993, 2009). The withdrawal of government infrastructural support for peasant farmers and the disbanding of parastatal marketing accorded with the prevailing market fundamentalist thinking of Reaganomics (Bates, 1981). As Havnevik et al. (2007: 57) observe: "Agronomic research and extension cutbacks dissipated the momentum towards resolving food insecurity. The agrarian solution to African hunger did not receive international research priority on a par with that accorded to Asia. Agricultural funding slipped from 24 per cent of total World Bank lending in 1982 to 12 per cent in 1997–99."

³ Regarding peasant agricultural patterns, it should be noted that hoe-based female farming systems, as described by Boserup (1970), have prevailed over vast areas of Sub-Saharan Africa. In West Africa, the sexual division of labor has often involved women's labour specialization in agricultural processing and trading activities rather than production of food crops per se (Guyer 1995).

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