Agrarian debates and gender relations: “Now you see them, now you don’t”

Shahra Razavi
Agrarian debates and gender relations: “Now you see them, now you don’t”

Shahra Razavi

Introduction: beyond a “missing gender dimension”

If there is one area where both mainstream approaches and gender analyses have a long history of reflection, research and advocacy, it is on the themes of this conference: gender, rural development and food. One could even argue that what became known as GAD or “gender and development” as a field of critical enquiry was conceived, born and raised in the context of debates on agrarian change, smallholder production and food security. Considering all of the literature on agricultural projects that, in Myra Buvinic’s words, “mis-behaved” in Burkina Faso and in the Gambia, and stories of family farming and peasant resistance in China and Vietnam on which many of us were raised, certainly there must have been quite extensive cross-fertilisation between gender analyses and mainstream analyses where agricultural topics are concerned.

This article is not solely concerned with a “missing gender dimension”, which can easily be added into the existing analyses of agrarian change. Rather, taking gender analysis seriously means re-thinking some of the core assumptions in the bodies of literature that address the various dimensions of agricultural issues, which I will consider later in this article. What we seem to have are essentially parallel bodies of

thought or parallel conversations – by political economists of agrarian change or neo-classical economists, on the one hand, and gender analysts on the other – with some fleeting moments of intersection – hence the title of this article: “Agrarian debates and gender relations: Now you see them, now you don’t”.

The limits of commodification and finer reading of the non-commodified sphere

The first set of issues concerns commodification (or commoditisation as some prefer to call it) under capitalist relations of production, and its limits. A note on terminology, commodification “takes place when economic value is assigned to something not previously considered in economic terms. So commodification refers to the expansion of market trade to previously non-market areas, and to the treatment of things as if they were a tradable commodity”.

The dynamics and impacts, not least environmental, of globalisation as it effects on international food regimes, and the problems and prospects of “peasants”/small farmers, are the subject of topical interest these days – in the academically inclined pages of journals, in more popular publications, as well as on the streets in the social movements that claim to be promoting “alter-globalisation” (e.g., Via Campesina among others). The more academically inclined arguments are often invoked by agrarian ecologists and their more radical populist wing committed to supporting rural peasant and farmer movements. They define their political project as one that is opposed to globalisation (at least its neo-liberal variant) and as post-neoliberal.

Jan Douwe van der Ploeg (2010) and Philip McMichael (2009) for example have separately argued that farming is increasingly being restructured in a “peasant-like way”. According to these authors – moving along the lines of the modernisation script – continued scale enlargement, specialisation, intensification based on increased input use, and the introduction of Genetically Modified Organisms, among other factors, is unattractive and often materially impossible. Food production in particular, they argue, can no longer be reproduced through the food and agrarian markets alone: “prices are too low, costs are too high, regulatory schemes are too suffocating, markets too turbulent, and banks too restrictive” (van der Ploeg 2010, 23).
Van der Ploeg further argues that there is a rebalancing of commodity and non-commodity relations taking place. The peasantry is reconstituting itself. “Farm units are actively pursuing decommoditisation on the upstream side, while a seemingly opposite tendency is observable on the downstream side, where the range of deliverable commodities is enlarged with non-commodities, such as hospitality, nature, landscape, local provisioning and care, being turned into commodities” (2010, 19). However, the paradox, he argues, is only on the surface. “The changes on the output side of the farms are intended to resist and partially escape the control that food empires exert over them and are congruous with increasing self-provisioning on the input side that aims to reconfigure relations with food empires. Both tendencies are driven by peasant resistance and both aim for greater autonomy and improved co-production” (20). Therefore, “self-provisioning of food by peasants is now often a purposeful and knowledgeable choice, the more so since it intertwines with the construction of autonomy and the need for fine-tuning the labour and production process” (7).

Engaging in a detailed critique of this perspective is beyond the scope of this article. Henry Bernstein has quite effectively pointed out what he calls the “lack of an adequate political economy” in this literature. Most problematic of all, as he argues, is the tendency to present farming populations everywhere as a single social category. There are sometimes fleeting references to differences between North and South, differences of market conditions, of gender relations, and so forth, but “this tends to be gestural in the absence of any deeper theorisation and more systematic empirical investigation of the conditions in which farming and agriculture are constituted by specific forms and dynamics of the capital-labour relations” (2009, 75). The question of class and other forms of social differentiation tends to be “subordinate to what all farmers (family farmers) have in common: first, exploitation by capital (food empires); and second, a special relation with and respect for nature” (75).

While this is a valuable critique, I would like to raise a more specific problem that I see in this literature from a gender perspective. First, despite all the talk of reproduction and decommoditisation, the literature on “the peasant way” completely ignores the great amount of uncommodified work that is carried out in all farming households (as in
non-farming households) and largely by women: the unpaid (non-commodified) forms of provisioning on a day-to-day basis – the washing, cleaning, cooking, feeding and caring of young, old, infirm and able-bodied alike – that reproduces labour on a day-to-day and generational basis, whether labeled as “labour reproduction” or unpaid provisioning of household needs. This work has been invisible to political economists of agrarian change (see Razavi 2009) and continues to be invisible in the literature that calls for the resurrection of a “new peasant way”.

Second, all the more interesting is these author’s views on non-commoditised circuits of reproduction as spheres of autonomy and resistance to capital (somewhat similar to the communitarian view of the family and community). Feminists have a far more ambivalent view of the non-commodified sphere. On the one hand, they recognise the value of non-commoditised work as the rock-bottom foundation of capital accumulation and all that goes on in the paid economy and in exchange systems. They would also agree with some of the authors contributing to the “new agrarian debate” in that non-commodified forms of work have expanded under current conditions of crisis and neoliberal restructuring – as costs of social reproduction have been shifted from capital/state to society/family. They would also agree that there are strong arguments for thinking that complete commodification is neither possible nor necessarily desirable. Livelihoods depend not only on money wages, but also on the unpaid work that reproduces the labour force over time and across generations.

On the other hand, gender analysts would be very skeptical about seeing the non-commoditised sphere as a one of autonomy and resistance to capital. Freedom from capital does not mean freedom from oppression – the unpaid economy has its hierarchies and can be very oppressive and exploitative. Diane Elson captures this contradictory picture very well when she says: “Like paid work, unpaid work has its satisfactions and dissatisfactions. The fact that much unpaid work, especially unpaid care work, is done for love, does not mean that we always love doing it. But the fact that unpaid work is frequently burdensome, does not mean that the best policy is to reduce it to zero” (2005, 2). In other words, while being the foundation of capitalist accumulation and essential to human well-being and flourishing, the non-commodified sphere of reproduction also has its own dynamics which can be experienced as repressive and exploitative.
Gender analysis (like political economy analysis of agrarian change) would suggest much greater precision both in characterising “farming populations” (rather than lumping them all under one single category of “peasants” or “farmers”). In addition, it would call for far greater specification as to what the alternative systems of production (or reproduction) are that will characterise the “peasant way” and generate the basis for a future post-capitalist, ecologically-friendly social order.

**Private property rights towards formalised land tenure systems**

Let me now turn to a second theme that has been emerging from the opposite end of the political spectrum: a technocratic preoccupation with private property rights in land and the need to formalise and modernise land tenure systems through titling and registration. Gender analyses of land tenure institutions have a long history of exposing the complex ways in which laws, customs, social norms, and power relations conspire to construct women as gendered subjects, sometimes excluding them from the ownership and control of property (especially immovable property like arable land) in some regions, or including them on terms that may be very different from those extended to men. The issue has been most extensively researched in South Asia by Bina Agarwal (1994) and in Latin America by Carmen Diana Deere and Magdalena León (2001).

Some of this work, however, has been taken up in policy and advocacy circles to make a rather simplistic argument that explains in a blanket fashion rural women’s poverty in terms of their lack of access to land (World Bank 2001).

The recent policy interest in land rights can be seen as part of a broader turn to “institutions”. The focus on institutions has been a central feature of the “good governance” agenda that was put forth by the World Bank in the early to mid 1990s. The idea here was to go beyond “shock therapy” stabilisation and the rolling back of the state that had dominated the World Bank’s approach in the 1980s. The goal of this “post-Washington agenda” was to respond to social concerns and to take a more serious look at institutions that underpinned markets.
These “governance reforms”, as they are often called, occupied a central place in multilateral and bilateral development strategies and their lending practices in the post-1990 period. Ostensibly their aim was to make institutions more efficient and accountable. The enforcement of property rights, “rule of law” and other elements were intended to facilitate the interaction between economic agents and the state, and be “market-enhancing”. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, the overwhelming emphasis and the bulk of investment under the rule of law rubric has gone into creating a suitable legal and institutional environment for the market, through reforms in areas such as commercial codes, bankruptcy, banking, tax and property laws including intellectual property, freedom of information and so forth. The assumption has been that by promoting technocratic institutional change – or “institutional monocropping” as Peter Evans (2008) would call it – a country’s economic performance would be enhanced.

The emphasis on secure private property rights in land, especially for women, has been given further impetus through various World Bank publications, including the 2001 policy report on gender (Engendering development through gender equality in rights, resources and voice) and the 2003 policy research report on land (Land policies for growth and poverty reduction), and more recently, the work of the UN Commission on Legal Empowerment of the Poor (CLEP, 2008) which was influenced by the ideas of Hernando de Soto who also acted as one of its co-chairs (see contributions by Naresh Singh, Ben Cousins and Willem Assies for different perspectives on the work of CLEP in CLEP 2008). The work of de Soto is well known for having advocated strongly in favour of the formalisation and legal recognition of the assets owned by the poor so that they can become “live capital” (i.e. so that they have market value and can be used as collateral), and at least in the work of the UN Commission, women were frequently mentioned as an important target of reform.

There are continuing debates about the strategic significance and transformative potential of individual rights to land for women in South Asia, as discussed by Nitya Rao in her contribution to this book. There are also questions about the relevancy of that argument for other regional contexts, especially rural sub-Saharan Africa where women’s farming is often constrained not because they are prevented from accessing land, but because they lack capital or regular non-
agricultural income to hire labour, purchase inputs and access marketing channels (Whitehead 2001; O’Laughlin 2008). The case study on Mozambique of land lying fallow while women (and men) seek casual wage work in nearby plantations because they do not have the resources to work the land (Sender, Oya and Cramer 2006) is also relevant here.

For sub-Saharan Africa, Lastarria-Cornhiel’s (1997) examination of the continent-wide evidence on the transformation of land tenure systems shows that these have tended to weaken women’s already tenuous claims to land while other groups (community leaders and male household heads) have been able to strengthen their control over land to the detriment of women and some minority groups. It is of course important not to homogenise women as a social group: there are always groups of women, for example urban women in formal employment or women in peri-urban areas, who may be growing food for city markets, and who might have accumulated enough resources to purchase land in their own name with full property rights. But efforts to superimpose western constructs of absolute and exclusive land rights on the more inclusive African systems of relative and “nested” rights, is seen by some as deeply problematic. While in the more socially embedded local level management systems a number of persons and community groups hold different rights to a piece of land, with formalisation and privatisation most of those rights were brought together and claimed by one person. In this process, women have tended to lose out. The fact that women enter the market system with no property, little cash income, minimal political power, and a family to maintain, works to their disadvantage.

The conclusion drawn by Whitehead and Tsikata’s (2003) comprehensive review of the gender and land literature for sub-Saharan Africa is also sobering, namely that in “the development of private property regimes of any kind, sub-Saharan African women tend to lose the rights they once had… either because their opportunities to buy land are very limited, or because local-level authorities practice gender discrimination” (79). It has become even more important to underline this statement given the extent to which policy documents across the political spectrum advocate a blanket policy mix of private property rights and land-titling not only as a mechanism to encourage capital investment and foster a more efficient land market, but also as
a solution to women’s weak and tenuous place within land tenure institutions (World Bank 2003).

Such evidence, though far from conclusive, nevertheless seems to suggest that gender advocates should have serious reservations about land markets, both formal and informal, as a mechanism for women’s inclusion. Yet women’s rights advocates do not seem to adopt a uniformly critical stance vis-à-vis land markets. In the context of recent policy efforts to liberalise land tenure institutions in Tanzania, for example, while some women’s rights advocacy groups were deeply sceptical of the liberalisation agenda, given the adverse implications of private property regimes for resource-constrained women, others did not share this dim view of land markets (Manji 1998; Tsikata 2003). In fact, some of the most influential gender advocacy groups supported the liberalisation of land markets and land titling because they perceived them as opportunities for women to purchase land on their own account and have it registered in their own name to be inherited by their descendents.

Further probing into the positions taken by women’s rights advocates in such debates would lead to the recognition of their genuine concern for how so-called “customary practices” have worked in practice to undermine, rather than enhance, women’s tenure security. The tribal authorities or chieftancies that have been re-invigorated in recent years may be neither traditional nor consistent with the “indigenous norms and structures” that have shaped land management practices on the ground. Many of these authorities, as the South African legal expert Annika Classens (2005) warns, are the custodians and witnesses of the discriminatory status quo. Reflecting a similar discontent, Aili Mari Tripp claims that in Uganda “[p]urchasing land has, in effect, become a way of circumventing the traditional authorities” (2004, 4). Other women’s rights advocates point out that liberalisation of land, whatever its risks and merits, is already underway and hence women should seek to gain a place in the emerging markets. This kind of position, rather than being simply a reflection of the middle class interests of women’s advocacy groups, as Abreena Manji (1998) claims, seems to be a response to the constraints within which they are operating. Yet it is also a response that is shaped by the particular worldviews that these networks share – a largely legalistic one.
Criticising and circumventing the traditional authorities and councils should not lead to the oversimplified view that land markets are a gender-neutral terrain, and that the main constraints women face is lack of information about their legal rights (hence, the emphasis by many of these groups on “legal literacy”). This is a very “lawyer-like/legalistic” view of land which ignores both the general structures of constraint (global, national, local) within which smallholder agriculture in developing countries operates today, and the gender-specific constraints that women smallholders face.

**Labour markets and their regulation**

One area of cross-fertilisation between the agrarian policy economy literature and gender studies has been around labour markets and women as a particularly exploited segment of the rural labour force (evident in the *Journal of Peasant Studies’* 1999 special issue on rural labour relations in India).

Unequal power relations of gender pervade both public (i.e., markets and states) and private institutions (i.e., family, households and community). Yet the World Bank (2001, 2006) continues to portray markets as essentially benign and gender-neutral. Gender equality, inequality and difference are only recognised as and when they operate within the institutions of the domestic or private sphere. Land markets, as discussed above, have been enthusiastically proposed as a solution for women smallholders in Africa and elsewhere (World Bank 2001). At the same time, very little is said about the extremely low wages of women agricultural labourers and the discrimination to which they are subject – whether they are employed by agribusiness and other large-scale operations to produce flowers, exotic fruits or cotton seeds for the export markets, or work as seasonal wage workers in smallholder farming producing food crops for domestic markets. The long tradition of feminist (and other heterodox) work that has analysed labour markets as social and gendered institutions is thus effectively brushed aside. In short, there is little recognition of the ways in which “gender inequality is not only weakened but also recreated and sustained by capitalist development… that a considerable degree of inequality is ‘hard-wired’ into the functioning of capitalist economies” (Elson 2009, 39).
What are we to make of the fact that a large and growing part of the economy and of labour operates beyond the regulatory reach of the state, in what is frequently referred to as the informal economy? As Barbara Harriss-White (2010) rightly observes, the absence of state regulation in the informal economy does not mean that there is no regulation; in practice economic “deregulation” has gone hand-in-hand with formal re-regulation since no market exists in a regulatory vacuum. Effectively then deregulation has meant greater freedom for business and markets from organised labour. At the same time the social institutions of gender, caste and other forms of identity operate as critical social regulators in this growing part of the economy.

Social regulation creates a regulative order in markets while also shaping many practices of well-being and security. But it is a highly hierarchical and discriminatory order, policed by local elites and “strongmen” (often in collusion with party bosses and local level state bureaucrats). For women and in many contexts, this translates to discriminatory wages, provision of minimal standards of decency and safety at work, and no access to social security. This is compounded by the fact that, at the same time, there has been a tendency towards the so-called “functional distribution of income” (i.e. the ratio of wages to profits) in favour of capital (UNRISD 2010, 63). The “distress” character of women’s labour market engagement – the fact that women often engage in casual wage labour or other income-generating activities off-farm when needs have to be met urgently (for example when a debt has to be repaid or medical expenses have to be covered, or when another breadwinner falls ill) – has been identified as a key factor that leads to what is sometimes called the “low reserve price” of their labour.

The neoliberal argument was that growth in itself would “lift all boats” – but in practice labour informality has grown and the relative share of wages has fallen even in contexts where growth rates are high, such as in India and China. An argument was also sometimes made that formal labour and their unions represented a “labour aristocracy” (and as feminists some of us had some sympathy for this argument, seeing how male-dominated some unions were). Some of that labour aristocracy now shares the plight of informally employed workers, summed up by the Indian National Commission for Enter-
prises in the Unorganised Sector as the “absence of job security, income security and social security”.

Upsetting this “order”, as Barbara Harriss-White, has argued, is therefore a hugely political project – however much we try to sanitise it and make it palatable by using headings such as “decent work”, “inclusive growth”, “inclusive markets” or other scenarios that promise to be “win-win”. There is a tendency in the international research and policy circles to focus on normative prescriptions related to policy and institutional reform without examining the politics of change. Yet real change will mean that there will be both winners and losers. And the prospects of such change depend crucially on the alignment of social forces and the types of collective action that promote and sustain a particular policy approach.

References


