

WOMEN AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN WEST AFRICA

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Engels was the first to attempt a systematic analysis of the material roots of male dominance in society (Engels, 1884). In re-examining Engel's theory in the light of studies of traditional African communities at varying stages of economic development ranging from hunting and gathering societies to ones with a sizeable exchange economy, Karen Sacks concludes that Engels' emphasis was misplaced and that it is not men's ownership of private property per se that gives them dominance, since some men own no property and some women do, it is rather the privatisation of women's labour in the production for use sector, which pushes them into a subordinate position (Sacks, 1971). Sacks argues that participation in social labour is the pre-requisite for being a 'full social adult' and that although a woman's domestic authority may be enhanced by the property she owns, her subordinate status in public life prevents her from achieving fully equal status with men even in the domestic sphere. Outside the family women's status diminishes as the range of activities undertaken within the context of the whole community excludes women's work.

From Engels' own analysis of the woman's situation in class and non-class society, and Sacks' modification of Engel's conclusions, two closely interrelated factors emerge as significant in determining the political and economic power which women enjoy in any society: (a) the presence or not of an exchange economy in which the bulk of private property is owned by men (by private property is meant ownership of the means of production); (b) the extent to which women participate in social labour. By social labour is meant any form of productive activity undertaken within the context of the community as a whole, as opposed to work of which the benefits are only felt by

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the individual or the family. In class societies the ruling class has control over social labour. Thus the feudal lord exacts days of labour from some institutions controlled by the bourgeoisie. Anyone engaged in marketing produce is participating in social labour since the function of distribution of goods is one that services the whole community. Because of this there is a close link between active production for exchange and participating in social labour. A woman farmer may be involved in production for exchange, but only if she has control over the sale of the product can she really be said to be engaged in social labour and be enjoying the influence that accrues from being engaged in production for exchange. The Ibo woman who extracts oil from palm fruits, but whose husband owns the oil and sells it, is working within the context of the family, not the community at large. Her work probably brings her no status outside the family, nor any wealth. The Engels-Marks theory therefore offers two sets of related determinants of women's power in society, measurable in the form of the following questions: (1) in an exchange economy to what extent do women own or control the means of production, especially the means of production for exchange? (2) to what extent are women engaged in social labour?

In this paper an attempt is made, using the above criteria, to make a rudimentary assessment of how women's situations in West Africa have altered as a result of the rapid expansion which has taken place over the last couple of centuries. Territorial movements of whole groups of agricultural settlers in search of new land or in flight from aggressors has ceased. Instead, the individual has become more geographically mobile. Farming and consumption patterns have changed following the introduction of food-crops such as cassava and corn. Faster transport and mechanised fishing have made more sea-fish available to people living in the hinterland. Imported foodstuffs provide additional sources of animal protein. Above all rural economies have been absorbed in

a unitary market system and the exchange sector of those economies has greatly expanded. The slave trade, mining, timber-extraction and cash-crop farming have brought West Africa into the world economy, with the result that commodity prices on the world market and international monetary fluctuations are of vital concern to modern West African States.

An important element in these economic changes was European imperialism and the political colonisation which went with it and lasted roughly from the late nineteenth century to the 1960s. Colonial administrations tried either to destroy and replace indigenous political institutions or to modify them to suit their own ends. At the same time missionaries made an assault upon the existing spiritual and social order. The colonial administrators and missionaries met with varying degrees of resistance from African institutions. Frequently their policies and actions had unforeseen side effects or results of a very different nature from those desired. The colonial presence was a powerful source of exogenous change which made its impact felt within a relatively short space of time. The accelerated rate of change brought about during the colonial period has not slackened since African countries gained formal independence.

One interesting aspect of the colonial phenomenon from the sociologist's point of view is that by injecting a concentrated dose of change factors into African societies it provided a time-telescoped laboratory in which social changes and interactions can be observed.

African societies as first studied by European anthropologists had mostly moved far beyond the stage of having a purely subsistence economy. In most cases there was some production for exchange, though one of the chief changes taking place since the onset of colonial rule has been the rapid growth of the proportion of production geared to exchange. It is important to note that Africa south of the Sahara has been affected by these changes in a highly uneven manner. There are still people living in the least accessible parts of the continent

whose contact with outsiders is minimal. The Mbuti of Zaire are one of the few peoples whose economy is still characterised by subsistence hunting and gathering (O'Laughlin 1974). The Mbum Kpau in Chad practise hoe agriculture, livestock rearing as well as hunting and gathering, but apart from the purchase of iron ore for making tools they do not trade goods outside the community. Exchange of subsistence goods within an Mbum Kpau village is done by barter (O'Laughlin 1974). The Mbum Kpau provide an example of a society considerably removed from the hunter-gatherer state of Mbuti society, yet almost untouched by European contact and having very little communication with their neighbours. In Mbuti and Mbum Kpau societies we see people operating very much as they might have done before the onset of colonial rule. At the other extreme are the coastal areas of Sierra Leone and Liberia where a substantial proportion of the population is descended from ex-slaves returned from the Americas. Even within fairly small modern states the impact of colonial rule and economic contact with the West has been very uneven. Life in Accra differs in many ways from life in many of the remoter rural areas of Ghana. Life amongst the poorer people in the rural areas still bears a closer resemblance to life there prior to European contact than does life in towns. Too much should not be made of this latter contrast since the effects of urbanisation have not been limited to the towns. Cash-cropping, improved communications and marketing infrastructure and rural-urban migration are some of the factors which have changed life in the rural areas. Nevertheless the unevenness of the degree of social change that has taken place, enables one to see more of the 'traditional' in some areas than others.

Colonial administrations wished both to increase the area under cultivation of export crops, and to bring all Africans within the orbit of their own style of cash economy. They therefore imposed taxes wherever they could and encouraged the cultivation of crops which could be sold for cash. Their efforts in these directions were

focussed exclusively upon men. British 'Indirect Rule' was based upon the use of indigenous political institutions to implement many of colonial local administrative policies. Consequently British colonial officers' perceptions of the political organisation of African communities was very important in creating institutions which were to shape the political organisation of these communities under colonial rule. Perhaps one of the greatest mistakes which the British made in this direction was to overlook the role played by women in many political systems. This omission became glaringly evident in Eastern Nigeria, where, in 1929 two million women were involved in the widespread disturbances known as the 'Aba riots'. The authority, organisational ability and communications network which the women's formal political organisations commanded, astounded the British authorities. Sylvia Leith-Ross, whose research amongst Ibo women was partly directed towards providing information towards a reassessment of colonial policy in the area, made the following comments:

Judging from my own experience among various peoples of Nigeria, I am inclined to believe that the women, because of their economic importance as mothers, farm cultivators and traders, have rather more power than is generally thought, and that therefore they must be taken into account in the framing of new legislation, or the introduction of new methods of trade or husbandry, or the creation of new social and economic institutions. (Leith-Ross, 1939:21).

Whenever a new occupational skill or cash crop was introduced by Europeans, the new technique required was taught to men. Similarly with school education and the subsequent job opportunities which it offered to a handful of Africans, the emphasis was upon education for boys (Foster 1965). Thus white collar jobs became a male preserve from the start, and the balance has only been partially redressed in later years. Throughout West African coastal and forest areas prior to the colonial era, regular markets were to be found, especially in areas of dense population and good communications.

The most lucrative and prestigious lines of trade, slaves, gold, palm oil, rubber, ivory and iron were plied by men (Dike 1956). The involvement of men in the most lucrative occupations reinforced traditional division of labour. Women were involved in selling foodstuffs and a variety of hand-made domestic utensils. They were involved in production for exchange but within the sphere most closely related to the household. Theirs were not the goods that could be traded with Europeans for iron bars, cloth or guns. Colonisation followed rapidly upon abolition of the European slave trade. This removed one form of male-dominated production for exchange; slave raiding and slave trading. It also increased the level of trade in other goods including those sold by women since it enabled unarmed individuals to travel long distances in greater safety than before. To some extent the innovations which introduced men to cash-cropping and wage labour and left women with food production both for use and exchange did not entail a radical departure from the pre-colonial division of labour between the sexes. The change was in the size and importance of the new exchange sector of the economy. Production for use correspondingly declined in importance. Moreover the new forms of production for exchange cultivation of cocoa, rubber or groundnuts required a very large quantity of land in the areas in which they flourished. Some of the cocoa-growing areas of Nigeria and Ghana and the groundnut-dominated land of the Gambia have become deficient in food production as a result of excessive monoculture. When a cash-crop boom prompts a community to rely upon production for exchange to provide even for a proportion of subsistence needs, the prospects of a slump in the sales of that cash-crop are grim indeed. One of the chief grievances of Ibo people in the 1930s was the drop in palm oil prices. One of the complaints voiced by Ibo women during the investigations after the 'Aba riots' was that "the land is changed - we are all dying - we are not as happy as we were before." (Leith-Ross 1939; p.38) The heart of the riot area was also the

area of the most concentrated palm oil production and severest land shortage.

There is evidence of shortage of land for growing food in Ashanti today where cocoa farmers have difficulty in recruiting labourers to work on their farms because of the high cost of food in those localities (Adomakoh-Sarfoh 1974: 137). The normal practice is to allow labourers to grow food on reserve farms, but since cocoa trees occupy all the land in most places labourers find themselves having to spend all their earnings on food imported to local markets. Many Yoruba women, deprived of the means of production for subsistence demand to be paid wages for the work they put into their husbands' farms (Galletti 1956). They too have to buy a large proportion of the foodstuffs which they need to feed the family. Ghanaian women often expect to be given a few acres of cocoa farm in return for their assistance in building up their husbands' farms. The great majority of cocoa farm owners are men, and where women own farms they tend to be smaller than those owned by men. Cocoa farmers are heavily dependent on the labour of female relatives, especially wives, in establishing their farms. The role of women in cocoa production appears largely as family labour in a supportive subsistence farming role. A result of the general increased demand for arable land is that increasing numbers of food farmers, especially those farming near urban centres, are obliged to rent land for food farming.

There are occasional instances where the usual pattern of male exploitation of new opportunities was reversed. When a new crop, cassava, became available to the Afikpo Ibo, men ignored it since the spiritually sanctioned prestige crop was yam (Ottenberg, 1959). Cultivation of yams was the province of men and was a very positively valued form of economic activity. In the absence of male interest in cassava, Afikpo women seized upon this new crop with alacrity. Thus

by their own efforts women were able to alleviate the annual famine period which used to precede the yam harvest. They were also able to sell the surplus at market. As a result of their increased economic capacity, particularly in production for exchange, women's influence increased. One of the Ibo women explained the situation:

Nowadays women do not care if the husband doesn't give them any food, for they can go to the farm and get cassava. If a woman has any money she rents some land and plants cassava. The year after she does this she can have a crop of cassava-meal, which she can sell and have her own money. Then she can say, what is a man, I have my own money (Ottenberg 1969).

For subsistence farming communities whose agricultural land is plentiful, the question of ownership or right to use land is of less political and economic importance than the labour to farm it. Thus the common arrangement whereby men owned land or had the right to use land, and where women owned the crops which they grew upon it, gave women effective if not de jure control over the means of production.

The importance of right of access to land in determining women's political and economic power becomes much greater when there is land scarcity as in the Ijaw villages of the delta region of Nigeria studied by Leis (1974). In one village where a man's wives customarily cultivated equal sized plots on his land, there was a strong network of women's councils which had considerable powers to legislate and enforce observation of their regulations by applying sanctions. This high degree of cooperation between women was possible because the right to equal portions of a man's land meant that women did not have to curry favour with their husbands in order to have the means to produce food for themselves and their children. There was no rivalry between co-wives for a man's land and favour and consequently there was a basis for co-wife solidarity. In the second Ijaw village studied by Leis conditions were broadly similar, with the exception of land distribution arrangements which were somewhat erratic. Women were

supposed to farm on land made available to them by their mothers, but many women were married and resident too far from the lands of their matrilineage to be able to farm there. As a result, some of a man's wives might have their own land whilst others had to beg some land from him. This made for inequality between co-wives regarding access to land and thus there was not a strong basis for co-wife solidarity. On the contrary wives were anxious not to offend husbands and therefore were less individually and collectively assertive. In this village there were no women's councils. Another difference between the two villages was that in the first, women regularly visited nearby markets to sell their agricultural surplus, and in the second village women were limited to exchange of subsistence produce within the village since there was no easy access to full-scale markets. Women were discouraged from travelling to distant markets and any who ventured to do so were labelled as 'promiscuous' and 'bad wives'.

The above study of the two Ijaw villages illustrates firstly the importance to women of who owns or controls the land which they farm. In neither village did women own the means of production but in one village they were guaranteed free access to it. Secondly, it should be noted that the more powerful group of women participated fully in production for exchange. They sold their surplus at market. Thirdly the more powerful group of women participated in 'social labour' as defined by Engels. Their women's councils organised village clean-up sessions and cutting of the long grass by river-banks. There is no indication that some near neighbours of the Ijaw, the Ibo, who also had women's councils, used them for organisation of any kind of communal labour. Their activities centred upon ensuring the smooth running of the market. This organisational work however is on a par with 'social labour' since it concerns the public exchange sector of the economy. The councils made their market regulations and enforced them. Their authority in all such measures was recognised by men who never interfered with the councils' work. The only matter over which the council's authority overlapped with that of the Senior males in the community was marital disputes (Leith-Ross, 1939:107). In these, women's councils

acted in consultation with senior men. The jurisdiction of West African women's councils does not cover land disputes or other matters of dispute between families. The close connection of the women's councils with the running of the village market is underpinned by the practice of having council meetings in the market-place after the day's trade is completed. The British colonial administration in Iboland prevented women's councils from carrying out their customary sanctions against recalcitrant offenders, namely, the spoilation of property and crops. This undermining of their authority may have been an aggravating factor behind the 1929 riots. The speed and ease with which women in scattered villages were mobilised for action is an indication of the organisational potential of the councils. However the attempt to co-ordinate them under an 'Ibo women's Union' failed utterly. The full participatory democracy whereby women debated until they all agreed, was not feasible on a large scale and women were reluctant to resort to majority vote decision-making or delegation. Some West African women's market organisations offer credit facilities to their members and to some strangers including men. In modern Ghana and Nigeria they perform the function of small-scale credit banks and are powerful political lobbying institutions.

A comparison between Ghanaian women in the north and the south of Ghana provides an illustration of how involvement in production for exchange is an important determinant of women's status and influence. In northern Ghana men predominate in farming. Women's household tasks are too-time-consuming to allow them to spend much time in the fields, and they do not exchange surplus produce on anything like the scale that women in the forest and coastal regions of Ghana do. Water in the north is scarce and women spend a lot of

time carrying their pots to and from the water source. In the North grains and not tubers are the food staples. The amount of pounding that goes into making porridge flour or extracting oil from grains is much greater than that involved in either preparing fufu or extracting palm oil. In Southern Ghana where women farm and market, and where the exchange sector of the economy is not dominated by male ownership of livestock, women enjoy greater freedom of association, control over their children, and access to private property. Goody emphasises that just because northern women do not farm and trade, it does not mean that their contribution to the family is any less essential. Of the economic role of women he writes, "To try to measure this purely in terms of contribution to agricultural or trading activity neglects the important role of women in food preparation, production of children and sex-gratification" (Goody 1972). The important point to note is that it is not the indispensability of women's contribution to the family economy that determines their status, it is rather direct involvement in production for exchange and some control over the sale of the product that counts. Fetching water and pounding millet are vital tasks but they constitute production for subsistence. Subsistence production is socially viewed as a subordinate complement to production for exchange.

One aspect of the social relations of production in which women inevitably play a crucial role is in the reproduction of the labour force. Women in this sense are the relations of production. In a subsistence economy where no surplus is produced for exchange, and all labour is social labour, women's reproductive role is a matter of interest to the whole society and is not controlled by any particular group of individuals. In a society where subsistence production has ceased to be social labour and takes place within the family context, the amount of control which a woman has over her own reproductive activity is important in determining her status within the family. It seems that women's control over their reproductive activity is a variable

dependent upon their involvement in production for exchange. It is where women are confined to subsistence production that their control over the means of production is least. Boserup describes how women in entirely male farming areas tend to be secluded, excluded from production for exchange, and from full adult participation in the social life of the community. In some societies where women's contribution to the economy is generally low, their only valued function being reproduction, women are valued so little that forms of female infanticide are practised. Nowhere in Africa is women's status so low as to reduce them to the mere chattel status which they have in certain Arab, Indian and Chinese societies (Boserup 1970). Nevertheless within Africa there are great variations in the amount of control a woman has over her marriages, sex-life, child-bearing and children.

Most traditional African social organisation is centered upon the corporate descent group traced unilineally. For a woman the big difference between a patrilineal and a matrilineal society is that in the one she bears children belonging to someone else's lineage and in the other she bears children belonging to her own lineage. It has been suggested that the rules of exogamy, patrilineal descent and virilocal residence cause women to be 'alienated from their own reproduction' (O'Laughlin 1974). This is perhaps an overstatement of the case. Whilst the female in-marrying affine may never juridicially become a member of the lineage, she is very much a member of the household in the widest sense. Far from being alienated from her children, she regards them as the means by which she is accepted into the lineage segment and as a source of influence. Although a female marrying into, for example, a Yoruba household may become a respected senior person, that fact that lineage property, including land and titles are vested in male lineage members effectively excludes them from decision-making regarding the distribution of the means of production within the lineage. Bridget O'Laughlin describes how amongst the Mbum Kpau where land is readily available and the tools for agriculture and hunting are very simple, married women as non-members of the lineage in which they live are economically disadvantaged. Although there are

no rules barring women from ownership of these, valued forms of property fall predominantly into the hands of senior men. Moreover, by virilocal residence the Mbum Kpau woman is cut off from help from her own kin in undertaking large tasks. A man can recruit free labour from his junior patrilineal kin, but a woman sponsoring a co-operative work group will have to find some means of offering recompense for that labour since it is not due to her as a lineage member. Thus Mbum Kpau men have more access to surplus labour than their women do, a factor which is very important in contributing towards wealth differences.

Men's evasion of their obligations towards wives and children, when not accompanied by increased support of female kin, must lead to an increase in the number of financially unsupported or under-supported mothers. In the light of overall developments in the economy it is not hard to see how this could have taken place. As the exchange economy expands so does the individual's dependence on cash income. Family obligations once fulfilled in kind become transmuted into cash, but the cash which most men can earn is not enough for them to carry out all of their obligations. In the case of Ghana a boom in world cocoa prices is followed by a slump, and no sooner has the price of cocoa recovered than the national economy is weakened by international inflation. During the period when the purchasing power of the majority of the population increased a number of manufactured imported commodities entered the consumption culture so that provision of these items became a part of the system of family obligations (Lawson). 'The new scarcity' therefore becomes the chief culprit in heightening weakness and tensions in the family system, whilst the fact that cash earning is more easily available to men than to women, ensures that women suffer in these changes in family system.

Partly as an extension of their traditional trading roles, and partly as a response to the need for their own cash income, West African women have swarmed into the distribution business. They are

wholesalers, retailers and transport owners. However the distribution system is fragmented to such an extent that only a small minority of women traders become substantially wealthy. The disproportionately large section of the West African labour force engaged in distribution can be attributed partly to the family system which requires that women have independent cash incomes, and to the fact that trading is the only source of cash earning open to most of them. On the other hand, Akan women in Ghana, are noted for their economic activity and their financial independence. However, being a financially independent head of the household may be one facet of the situation; lack of help in training and providing for the children may be another facet of the same situation. A successful woman trader can put her children through school, be free of any restraint on her activities by either husband; brother or uncle, and enjoy respect and influence as a result of her wealth. Her less advantaged sister may be really struggling just to feed her children. The expansion of the exchange sector of the economy has enabled a few West African women to become extremely wealthy and independent. To a large extent a woman's independence depends on the strength of her economic situation as compared to that of her husband and her kin. If a woman's resources are slim and those of her husband or kinsman are substantial then she is likely to be financially dependent on that person who is therefore likely to exercise some control over herself and her children. Such relationships of financial dependence are not limited to relationships between man and women. A wealthy woman trader may pay the school fees of her poorer sister's children and have all her sisters and their children at her back and call. A similar state of economic affairs has come about in the cash-cropping areas of southern Nigeria. Studies of Yoruba family life suggest that patrilocality keeps the proportion of female household heads much smaller than in Akan society. Urban accommodation problems have broken some polygynous households into a number of mother-children units (Izzett 1961).

Traditionally Yoruba wives, including those living in towns, supported themselves and their children by farming land allocated to them by their husband's patrilineage. In the modern urban situation, unless he can give them sufficient capital to make a living by trade, the Yoruba husband is not in a position to provide his wives with the means to make a living. Consequently wives either have to fend for themselves or depend entirely on cash contributions from their husbands. The more successful women traders are often either heads of their own households, or else live with their own patrilineal relatives with whom they enjoy positions of influence. Izzett notes that such women tend to keep their daughters very close to them and arrange the making and even breaking of their marriages. They may encourage their daughters to have liaisons with wealthy men rather than subject themselves to inconveniences of marriage with someone less well-off. There is scope then for a few women in both Akan and Yoruba society to become influential and independent through wealth.

The position of daughters and wives of the professional elite is very different from that of the peasantry and the petty bourgeoisie. For the purposes of this discussion, 'elite', will refer to members of the higher professional stratum, doctors, lawyers, university lecturers, business executives and higher grade civil servants. Because of the narrow educational opportunities which have been available to women, there are very few of them in higher professional employment. Oppong's study of elite married couples in Accra (Oppong 1974), and P.C. Lloyd's work on elites in Africa (Lloyd 1966), show that most elite men marry women in the lower professional stratum, teachers, nurses or clerks. Therefore elite men tend to have much higher earning capacity than their wives who are dependent on the husband for the high standard of living which they enjoy. Elite women cannot afford to risk losing their husbands, and in any kind of struggle over marital roles and responsibilities they are in a relatively weak position. Differences between patterners in access to

material resources are not camouflaged by ideas of mutual sharing as they tend to be in Western society, they rather form the basis of the bargaining situation. Oppong found that the higher a woman's educational qualifications and earning power in comparison to that of her husband, the more likely the couple was to operate a syncratic mode of decision-making and to share responsibility for household tasks. Given that syncratic decision-making is an expected corollary of the companionate type of marriage, and that Akan elite wives desire the latter, one can deduce that women with relatively high earning capacity are coming closer to achieving the type of marriage they desire, than are other wives of elite men.

For the elite West African wife, a companionate and monogamous style of marriage is desirable. The modern elite husband's material provision for his wife and children constitutes a much higher proportion of their income than it did in traditional society or still does amongst the urban and rural non-elite. It is therefore very important to the wife that she be the only woman with access to her husband's financial resources. Oppong found that one of the commonest sources of domestic conflict between elite couples concerned the wife's disposal of her income. Wives were reluctant to contribute more to the running of the household than they were absolutely forced to. One reason for this may be the wife's fear that the more cash the husband has at his disposal the more he will spend on outside wives and girl friends. An ordinance marriage which is a monogamous one, gives a wife certain inheritance rights over her husband's property; rights which she would not enjoy under customary law. For an elite woman the economic advantages of a monogamous marriage outweigh those of a polygynous one. Women in the traditional Yoruba household relied upon their co-wives to help with housework and child-rearing but the recently evolved style of polygyny does not offer such facilities. The elite wife can employ

domestic servants and perhaps have young relatives to stay and help in the house as well.

One reason for the increased popularity of outwardly monogamous marriages amongst the upwardly mobile elements in towns has to do with the behaviour patterns expected and encouraged by European educators and employers. A mission education was often the man's only means of economic advancement and for the purpose of impressing teachers and the colonial administration which employed him he would adopt Christian practices (Foster 1965). Besides, in order to convince his superiors in the colonial administration that he was suitable for promotion it was useful if not imperative for the civil servant that he maintain a monogamous front. Even today in modern independent Africa European life-style serves as some sort of a reference model for members of the elite. It is not a matter of prestige for an elite man to accumulate wives. He would rather display his wealth by purchasing cars and houses. This does not mean that polygyny is not practised by elite men, merely that the form of polygyny has altered. The 'formal' wife's desire to keep her husband to herself does not prevent him from having relationships with other women, having children with them and contributing to their maintenance. The 'formal' elite wife, because of her weak economic bargaining position, often has to put up with a style of marriage which she may not find satisfactory. Under traditional polygynous arrangements there was a sense of order; co-operative tasks were undertaken by wives and the husband attempted to give an equal amount of material assistance to each. Even where wives were living matrilocally they would still co-operate in assisting on the husband's farm.

Today, the form of polygyny as practised in West African society has changed. Whilst some of the better-off farmers and businessmen may marry more than one wife in the traditional manner, there are a number of urban men who maintain a girl friend as well as a wife. The 'girl friend factor' in 'monogamous' marriages is an important deterrent to

wives willingness to contribute to any household expenses which they can force upon the husband (Karanja-Diejomoah 1976).

Another factor which prevents conjugal partners from pooling their resources is the financial obligation which both retain towards their kin (Oypong 197a).

Kenneth Little, commenting on courtship and marriage patterns among educated young women in West African towns suggests that "It is a question of deciding whether she should exchange economic and sexual independence for a marital state which may not be compatible with her own views of a modern satisfactory marriage" (Little, 1959). However, there is as yet no sign even of women with very high earning capacity postponing marriage long after the completion of their studies or rejecting it altogether.

The economic changes taking place in West Africa have been characterised by two developments of particular relevance to women. The first is the expansion of the exchange sector of the economy in which men have increased their participation more than women have, and the second is the introduction of a modern sector of the economy in which men's participation has also been greater than women's. Many men have given up subsistence farming altogether, and many others are more deeply involved in production for exchange than they were before. Women too participate more than before in the exchange economy in absolute terms, but the shift in division of labour between the sexes has been characterised by a **proportionately greater increase in men's** involvement in the exchange sector of the economy. In the modern job sector, including large-scale industries and trading enterprises, banks, and all forms of employment in the public sector, the number of women in proportion to men is much smaller than in the traditional sector of the economy.

In both Ghanaian and Nigerian society women are active or dominant in subsistence farming, petty and medium-scale trading, nursing, teaching and some clerical work. They play a minor part in cash-crop production, manual wage employment, managerial work in both the public and private sector, and higher professional work. This division of economic and occupational spheres between the sexes has important implications for the emergence of socio-economic classes. Female predominance in subsistence production and the least lucrative areas of the exchange economy tends to blunt awareness of socio-economic difference between groups of people, and rural-urban differences. This is because many poor women have access to financial help from men slightly better off than themselves. The role of women in West African economies and the changes that these have undergone are important both with regard to family authority structure and overall class developments.

The expansion of the traditional as well as the modern sector of the economy enabled many more women to participate in 'social labour' than did in traditional West African society and thus many more women may be called 'full social adults'. At the same time however, the greater differentials in wealth that have accompanied the growth of private property have left women as a group, heavily weighed towards the bottom of the income and private property scale.

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