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## **African Market Women and Economic Power: The Role of Women in African Economic Development. Bessie House-Midamba and Felix K. Ekechi, editors. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995. xix, 214 pp.**

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Whereas women in some parts of Africa have been involved in trade since at least the seventeenth century, in the past 25 years African market women have become the subject of considerable academic interest. Much of the ethnographic and sociological research conducted in the marketplaces and streets throughout sub-Saharan Africa has been guided by one of two major goals.

First, feminist scholars have sought insights into fundamental questions about the relationship between capitalism (or "economic development") and patriarchy. Historical references to powerful market "queens" in precolonial West Africa, for example, generated debate about whether customary exchange and property relations gave women in general the means to accumulate wealth and status or whether, like today, gendered access to resources limited opportunities for all but a small minority of women. Although the frustratingly sketchy historical record may leave this particular debate unresolved, contemporary observations of more and more women throughout the continent turning to petty trade out of economic desperation are beyond dispute. In the current era of structural adjustment, economic reforms intended to "unleash" capitalist development have not freed women from the gender norms that grant them heavy domestic responsibilities but few resources or freedoms. For many, then, small-time commerce represents one of the few if not only options for survival.

A key question now has become to understand how women working even under this bleak imperative can find in the marketplace a measure of status, autonomy and solidarity-how, in other words, they find in trading, if not necessarily an escape from poverty, then perhaps the means to challenge oppressive gender norms. Also needed is more attention to differentiation and stratification between and within groups of traders. The many ethnographies of small-time vendors and the relatively fewer accounts of commercial

high-rollers (the "Mama Benzes") tend not by themselves to explain what configurations of culture and political economy are most conducive to successful women's trading, either on an individual or community level.

The second common concern underlying research on African market women is that of employment and food security in rapidly growing cities. Some of the earliest studies of the so-called informal sector, sponsored by the International Labor Organization, showed that a much higher proportion of the urban population than previously realized was making a living in small-scale street, market, and home-based trades. Since then, this proportion has, if anything, increased as urban populations continue to grow faster than formal-sector labor demand (especially under structural adjustment mandates to "rationalize" employment in industry and civil service). In addition to providing jobs for both women and men, informal commerce also of course brings food to otherwise poorly serviced neighborhoods of African cities. Except perhaps in South Africa, supermarkets play a minor role in urban provisioning, with most foodstuffs, especially fresh foods, moving instead through the dense and intricate circuits of regional and local traders. These "middlemen" (often women) are often criticized for inefficiency and sometimes prosecuted for presumed hoarding or unfair pricing, but no government or private corporation has succeeded in distributing such a volume and diversity of foodstuffs as broadly or as affordably as informal traders.

Feminist researchers on African food supply have observed that customary circuits of food commerce endure at least in part because they are run by women who, like the classic "self-exploiting" peasant, work long hours for very little, and for whom the bottom line is survival. Ironically, these women traders' stubborn persistence has made them easy to neglect. Compared to development aid targeted either to farmers (male or female) or to other kinds of informal enterprise (i.e., construction, small-scale industry) programs to assist women traders are rare, and often limited to infrastructural improvements, like new plumbing and roofing in the marketplaces. Although these help, recent research indicates that the critical food-security issue for urban consumers is not marketplace sanitation so much as the financial security of the traders themselves, which has typically suffered under the austerity conditions of structural adjustment. Not only do these women's earnings directly feed numerous dependents, but they also buy the next day's stocks, and allow credit for cash-poor customers. If a trader goes broke, in other words, it is not only she who goes hungry. Unfortunately, the financial instability common among small-scale food vendors reflects structural conditions much harder to fix than dilapidated marketplaces.

Clearly, research on African market women addresses issues of concern well beyond African studies. An edited collection such as *African Market Women and Economic Power* therefore offers a useful introduction to anyone not familiar with the by now quite sizeable literature. Its 10 chapters cover both historical and contemporary material drawn from West, East and Southern Africa. All are concerned with how prevailing political economic conditions--whether those of colonialism or structural adjustment--as well as gender ideologies affect market women's work; several also emphasize the contribution women traders make to national economic development.

The strongest articles in the collection (by Catherine VerEcke, Claire Robertson, and Jeanne Downing) all use comparative data, albeit in quite different ways. They are effective because they show concretely how particular cultural or political-economic variables (i.e., Islam, colonial urban policy) explain regional and local differences in women's marketing activities.

Robertson's article, comparing the strong commercial tradition of Ga women in the Ghanaian capital of Accra with the more crisis-driven trade activity among the Kikuya of Kenya, is particularly sophisticated. She argues that the "comparative advantage" of the former lies in the fact that, for a variety of reasons, multiple generations of Ga women live and work together in Accra, and consider trade a right and custom as well as a necessity. Neither indigenous household structure nor colonial native policies in Kenya historically facilitated the development of intragenerational women's commercial enterprises, but Robertson finds evidence that contemporary poverty and marital instability are forcing women to change how and where they live and work. The result is that although they are poorer they are also, like their Ghanaian counterparts, more economically autonomous of men, and more committed to that autonomy. This is precisely the kind of analysis that sheds light on the dynamic between gender and economic change. VerEcke's chapter details a more microlevel study of Islamic Northern Nigeria and Downing's macrolevel analysis of Southern Africa, both with interesting new findings.

Unfortunately, some of the articles are quite weak, and seem more interested in portraying their subjects in a positive if not heroic light than in contributing anything to existing knowledge. Whereas the introduction claims that all the chapters are based on original research, a few of them make scant reference to the authors' own findings, and instead rely heavily on oftentimes inappropriate quotes from outdated secondary sources. Others contain more evidence of fieldwork, but no new observations; they simply remark (as did the earliest studies in the 1970s) that the market women work hard to feed their families, and contribute to economic development. All very true, but after several reiterations not very useful.

The sense of redundancy is compounded by the fact that many of the articles begin by reviewing the same standard "women in development" literature; the editors could have more effectively put this material in the introduction. In addition, their range of case studies should have extended beyond anglophone Africa. In francophone West and Central Africa especially, women traders have long participated prominently in multiple forms of commerce as well as national and local politics, but against a backdrop of laws, policies and commercial structures formed under quite different colonial administrations. They deserve at least some mention in a book that claims to cover the whole of sub-Saharan Africa.

**Green Globe Yearbook of International Co-operation on Environment and Development 1997, edited by Helge Ole Bergesen and Georg Parmann. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. pp. 358, index.**

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As someone who teaches undergraduate engineering students about the environmental and social effects of a technological world view, I sometimes find myself