

Editorial

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This special issue on African women workers in a changing world discusses several themes that have long been the concern of feminist scholars with an interest in women's work: transnational capitalism and its implications for women's productive activities, the debilitating impact of land tenure arrangements in Africa on women's productive and reproductive responsibilities, as well as state actions and inactions in support of women's productive activity.

Transnational capitalism's interest in the African continent dates back five hundred years beginning with the slave trade through to the colonial project and is evident today in the principle of trade liberalisation embedded in the neoliberal project. Scholars who work from a feminist political economy perspective highlight how the activities of transnational capital impact the daily existence of women across the globe (Agenjo-Calderón, 2021). Those who work from an intersectional perspective acknowledge that whether or not women feel the positive impact of transnational capital depends on many other socio-demographic characteristics such as race and class.

Geographic location is also of crucial importance in this discussion as transnational capital's impact varies depending on where in the world it travels, with women living in postcolonial spaces impacted differently than those in other spaces (Desai and Rinaldo, 2016).

As Desai and Rinaldo (2016) point out, on the African continent, transnational capitalism's impact has been largely negative and African women are the ones who have borne the brunt of this negative impact. Evidence from the twenty-first century makes this abundantly clear. While transnational capital is not new to the African continent, its form has changed quite dramatically in the last two decades. Transnational capital has made major inroads into the acquisition of land on the continent. By the 2000s, the environmental and food crisis, coupled with the global financial crisis of 2008 led to a sudden and steady

interest in agricultural investments on the African continent (Cotula, 2011). As Moyo *et al.* (2012) remind us, these land acquisitions were by no means the first on the continent. The second wave became a century plus after European states had met and essentially carved up the continent for their purposes in the Berlin conference of 1884. This second wave of acquisitions is novel, however, to the extent that the actors involved in the process varied widely. In addition to the usual suspects from Europe, including Scandinavian countries (Boamah, 2011), as Moyo *et al.* (2012: 182) note, the second wave of acquisitions now includes "...non-Western, semi-peripheral competitors..." This new wave of actors from the non-West includes those from China and the Middle East. The United States of America (Cotula *et al.*, 2014) is also deeply involved.

The process by which these transactions take place has been the subject of much scholarly interest; the discovery, among other things, that in some places free, prior and informed consent is not sought from community members led to the concept of land grabbing, to reflect the exploitative nature of these transactions (Ahmed *et al.*, 2019). The states' complicity in facilitating land grabbing is evident in the lack of regulation to ensure appropriate procedures for acquiring large tracts of land within their borders that centre the needs and concerns of their citizenry. In places where large land acquisitions have taken place, women have been particularly worse off as they were often denied the rather paltry sums paid to the family heads or traditional leaders for lands lost (Tsikata and Yaro, 2014). Even when they did not lose land directly, they were likely to do so indirectly as male family members who were made landless as a result of land acquisitions then sought to take over the lands held by women in their families (Nyantakyi-Frimpong and Bezner Kerr, 2017). The economic impacts of these grabs were also enormous. Across the continent, scholars documented how incomes were lost and new livelihood options had to be found, often without much success (Schoneveld *et al.*, 2011; Feintrenie, 2014; Valbuena, 2015). The promise of large-scale land acquisitions was more mirage than reality.

Alongside the landgrabs, another aspect of transnational capital evident on the continent, spearheaded this time specifically by the Chinese, has been the search for raw materials to fuel the economic development of China. As the Chinese embarked on an expansionist project, they looked to the African continent for the raw materials to fuel their dreams. Raw minerals such as bauxite,

manganese, and gold have been a major source of interest, as has cheap labour to run large-scale companies such as textile firms (Lee, 2009). Scholars, in interrogating these aspirations, termed the Chinese as Africa's new imperialists (Cheru and Calais, 2010). The early years of Chinese incursions into the continent spawned a large body of work mostly critical of the Chinese presence on the continent (Manji *et al.*, 2007). A few voices, nonetheless, suggested that the nature of Chinese investment on the continent was as much an issue of Chinese self-interest as it was of African governments' poor governance mechanisms (Kragelund, 2009; Lee, 2009; Crawford and Botchwey, 2017).

In both the case of landgrabs and Chinese incursions into the continent, the state can be blamed for its neglect of the needs of its citizens even as it courted foreign direct investors. This behaviour of the state harkens back to the 1980s when neoliberal reforms began on the continent. Implemented through a series of structural adjustment programmes imposed on many African countries by the international financial institutions, these reforms included, among others, the removal of subsidies, the sale of state-owned enterprises and retrenchments of government employees, as well as the introduction of new taxes and non-traditional exports (Riddell, 1992). As with landgrabs, women bore the brunt of the structural adjustment reforms. This was evident in many ways. Concerning the retrenchments, for example, the principle that underlay them was "last in, first out". Given that women had entered the formal workforce last, a much larger percentage lost their jobs than men did. In Ghana for example, by the time the retrenchments were over, although only 21% of civil service employees were women, 35% of those who were retrenched were women (Haddad *et al.*, 1995: 892). In addition, the removal of subsidies, particularly in the health sector, meant that many families could no longer afford health care and had to rely on the women in their families for caregiving during periods of illness. Mothers, caught between their productive and reproductive responsibilities, delegated caregiving to daughters, who were then deprived of education (Assie-Lumumba, 1997).

For African women, the majority of whom work in the agricultural sector, the detrimental impact of transnational capitalism is evident in how it has reconfigured the world of work as they know it. Data from nearly a century ago makes it clear that African women have been actively involved in agriculture since at least the early 1900s. Baumann (1928) in his research on 213 societies across

the continent showed that agricultural tasks were shared equally between women and men in 55% of these societies and that, in 34% of the societies, women were the predominant actors in the agricultural sector. It was only in 11% of these societies that men were the main actors in the field of agriculture. These differences were based on location. In describing these geographic differences, Baumann (1928: 292) says:

In the steppes and savannas of the Sudan and East Africa, the man shares with more or less energy in the work of hoe culture; he hoes the ground, sows, weeds, and harvests, alone or with his women folks. In the West African primeval forest, all he ever does is to clear the ground, and leaves all the rest of the work to the women.

The statistics from more recent times also point to the active involvement of women in the continent's agricultural sector. As Asmare *et al.* (2022: 1, 2) point out:

...data from [the] Food and Agriculture Organization shows that women constitute approximately 50% of the agricultural labor force in Africa. According to [the] International Labour Organization, women account [for] almost half of the labor force in world's (*sic*) agriculture, representing 47% in Africa. As (*sic*) to Jacobs and Dinham, women in many countries of Africa make up a significant proportion of agricultural work; 90% of hoeing and weeding and 60% of harvesting and marketing.

Although the statistics vary widely from one source to the other, it is clear nonetheless that women continue to play a significant role in the agricultural sector on the continent. However, women's active participation in agriculture occurs in the context of much disadvantage. More than half of the land on the continent is held under customary tenure (Errico, 2021). These customary arrangements are by no means egalitarian. As Whitehead and Tsikata (2003: 77) state:

...men and women have rarely, if ever, had identical kinds of claims to land, largely because the genders have very differentiated positions within the kinship systems that are the primary organizing order for land access.

So, although women can claim access to land based on a variety of social relationships – wife and daughter among others – for purposes of cultivation, they rarely have control over the land. They do not own it and therefore cannot

transfer it to others (Whitehead and Tsikata, 2003). Often also, women only have access to poorer quality lands (Nyantakyi-Frimpong and Bezner Kerr, 2017). Given these existing realities, any external actors that seek to engage in economic activity requiring land on the continent simply impoverish women even further, as clearly illustrated in the articles in this volume that speak to these issues, specifically those on Mali and The Gambia.

In the first feature, Asmao Diallo, writing on women in Mali, discusses how private capital's incursions into land acquisition in rural Mali have dramatically transformed the lives of women in these communities. In addition to noting the economic impacts of large-scale land acquisitions, as has been done by many other scholars on the continent (Schoneveld *et al.*, 2011; Tsikata and Yaro, 2014; Nyantakyi-Frimpong and Bezner Kerr, 2017), Diallo goes a step further to point out the negative social impacts of these transformations (i.e., domestic violence, family disruptions, conflict and its ensuing sexual and gender-based violence) in an environment where women's household provisioning roles are heavily dependent on their access to land. She concludes by discussing the important ways in which the state could step in to ameliorate the circumstances of these women.

Similarly, writing on The Gambia in the second feature piece, Fatou H. Jobe discusses the impact of Chinese-Mauritanian fishmeal processing factories on women in The Gambia who have traditionally been the ones in charge of the processing and trading of fish. She discusses the lack of job opportunities for women in these factories even as the establishment of these factories on land to which these women had use rights displaces the female fish processors and disrupts the work of female gardeners. Using an ecofeminist and feminist political ecology perspective, she concludes that the activities of the Chinese-Mauritanian firms lead to dispossession and ultimately hinder the food security needs of households in The Gambia.

While the two articles on Mali and The Gambia illustrate how African governments' inattention to the potentially negative impact of transnational capital spells doom for African women, other changes on the continent in the last two decades are as a result of deliberate efforts on the part of the state to empower its citizens. Of particular interest in this issue and the focus of the second pair of articles is the transformative agenda underpinning the land

reform programme in Zimbabwe. The British colonised Zimbabwe from 1890-1980. Its more favourable climate vis-à-vis the West African sub-region led to settler colonialism, where the European settlers expropriated the best lands for themselves, routinely moving Africans off those lands to enable them to develop commercial farms. By the end of the colonial period, the 5,000 commercial farmers in Zimbabwe owned nearly half of the available land – 15 million out of 33.2 million – with 750, 000 African families left to share what remained (Thomas, 2003: 694).

The land reform programmes of the first post-independence government were an active attempt on the part of the Zimbabwean government to redistribute land in favour of the black Zimbabweans who had been denied access to prime lands for a century. The first of these programmes, which was in place from the time of independence until the 1990s, was developed as part of the Lancaster House Agreement that led to independence from Britain. A key tenet of that first reform programme was the principle of willing seller and willing buyer. Only 3,498,444 hectares of land were transferred between 1980 and 1997 (Waeterloos and Rutherford, 2004: 538). Recognising the slow pace of land transfers, a second reform programme known as the Fast Track Land Reform Programme was put in place in 2000. Premised on compulsory acquisitions, this programme has resulted in the transfer of thrice as much land; ten years after it began, 10,816,886 hectares of land had been transferred (Chiweshe, 2017: 19). In the fast-track land transfer scheme, the Zimbabwean state also made an effort to ensure that women, long denied land rights, could gain rights to land of their own. Munemo *et al.* (2022), in an earlier issue of this journal, find that women's land ownership has grown from next to nothing before the Fast Track Land Reform Programme to about 15% since the implementation of the programme.

The third and fourth feature pieces in this issue focus on the transformative power of the fast-track land reform programme initiated by Robert Mugabe's government in 2000. This programme has not been without controversy. There has been much discussion about both the brutal nature of the takeovers, deemed illegal in some quarters, as well as its potential for radically transforming access to land in rural communities and thus improving the livelihoods of the millions who depend on the land for a living (Cliffe *et al.*, 2011). These two papers contribute

to the latter discussions by turning a lens on the impact of this reform on rural Zimbabwean women. Both papers provide a nuanced accounting of the impact of the land reform programme.

The first piece that interrogates the land reform programme in Zimbabwe is co-authored by Tom Tom and Resina Banda. These two authors focus on the Zvimba district of Zimbabwe and explore the transformatory power of the land reform by investigating the redistributive, protective, and reproductive outcomes of the land reform. They start by pointing out the fact that the transformatory potential of the land reform, with specific reference to redistributing land in favour of women, had been woefully inadequate. In their district of study, only four out of 56 farmers who had received land were women. In addition, these women had gone on to bequeath their lands to their sons, and not their daughters, thus turning the land reform benefits into a one-generation miracle. In terms of the protective outcomes of the land reform programme, the authors document that it has been worse, not better; workers have very long working days averaging 12 hours a day, in contrast with the 8-hour working day of the past and in addition, wages are low and paid sporadically and sometimes in kind rather than in cash. As a result, female farm workers cannot accumulate the capital required to undertake their social reproduction needs and have to rely on alternative, equally precarious livelihood options.

In the second piece on Zimbabwe, Newman Tekwa focuses his work on female farm owners as opposed to workers. He undertakes his study in a region in Zimbabwe where the percentage of women with A2 farms was twice the national average: Chiredzi district. He demonstrates that indeed in this district, thanks to the land reform programme, rural Zimbabwean women had been able to take on the identity of commercial farmers, an identity hitherto reserved for men. As commercial farmers, their incomes had increased; they were decision-makers on their farms, and they were purchasing farm equipment, particularly tractors. However, these changes in the productive arena had not been translated into changes in the reproductive arena. Women were still expected to be primarily responsible for the social reproduction needs of their households. A full third of the women, therefore, had a work day that was longer than 12 hours as

they had to combine responsibilities in their productive work with those of their reproductive work. Ultimately then, Newman Tekwa argues that the full transformatory potential of the land reform programme had not been achieved.

The fifth feature piece in this issue turns attention to the high unemployment rates on the continent and state (mis) efforts at addressing it. Africa is the world's most youthful population. According to statistics that Mulikita (2022) provides, two-thirds of Africa's population (70%) is under the age of 30. Even more striking is the fact that while the global average of children aged 15 years and younger is 25%, on the African continent, 40% of the population is under the age of 15 (Saleh, 2022). The youthful population find themselves having to wait for long periods before they can be gainfully employed and proceed to live meaningful lives as adults able to provide for their basic needs as well as those of their families. Honwana (2014) has described this unique phenomenon on the continent as *waithood*. To ameliorate this situation, some African governments have embarked on job creation opportunities in the public sector, even in the neoliberal period when the ideological position is to leave job creation to private capital. As with the efforts of the Zimbabwean government, such efforts on the part of the state are an attempt to address the needs of the citizenry.

This piece written by Ramona Baijnath explores the impact of one such state effort in South Africa. In response to the high rates of unemployment among the South African population, the South African state developed an Expanded Public Works Programme. Drawing on the work experiences of women employed in a public hospital, this author offers a much more nuanced narrative about the programme than official documents suggest. She shows that while the employees were happy about the incomes they earned, however temporary, they were quite unhappy about the institutionalised forms of discrimination they had to endure. This discrimination was manifested in two ways. First, as short-term contract workers, they were denied the benefits that permanent workers received, such as pensions. In addition, they were not provided similar access to resources at work. Even toilet paper and soap were distributed unevenly such that the workers employed through the Expanded Public Works

Programme had to provide their own supplies because as short-term contract workers, they were not entitled to these supplies.

In the final feature piece, Amanor-Wilks describes the narrow ways in which Ghanaian women participate in the kente industry, a traditional fabric-making industry. She points out how the structural adjustment reforms of the 1980s, which led to the removal of subsidies, the sale of state-owned enterprises, and unfettered trade liberalisation, resulted in the decline of Ghana's cotton industry and, by extension, eroded women's roles as cotton spinners in the kente industry. The decline in the cotton industry, coupled with the lack of effort on the part of the Ghanaian state to develop curricula and social programmes that unsettle gender norms, has led to constraints in occupational opportunities for Ghanaian women, the majority of whom participate in the kente industry as traders. The other aspects of the industry, especially weaving, continue to be the preserve of men. As it was when the industry first developed two centuries ago, so it is today, unfortunately. Nonetheless, in the last two decades, there has been a slow increase in the number of women with weaving knowledge.

Together, the six feature pieces in this issue speak to the various ways in which transnational capitalism, land tenure arrangements, and the various forms of gender-blind state attention have reconfigured women's work on the continent. They point out how African women, the majority of whom work in agriculture, have not made much progress on the work front over the last hundred years. In fact, over the last century, their opportunities for provisioning as agricultural workers have not improved by much. Indeed, the state's interest in courting transnational capital has led to a worsening of its circumstances. Even in the case where the state seeks actively to improve the lot of women working in agriculture, as in the Zimbabwean land reform programme, we find that the progressive changes made in the productive sphere do not automatically translate into the reproductive sphere. Women are therefore more burdened, even as they have been provided with better access to land for agricultural purposes. When the state has embarked on job creation, it has done no better. As the article on South Africa demonstrates, workers in these programmes experienced institutional discrimination. And as evident in the final feature piece, the lack of effort on the part of the Ghanaian government to unsettle traditional gender norms has led to a situation where very little has changed in terms of women's entry into occupations traditionally reserved for men.

In the standpoint piece, Bashiratu Kamal, herself a unionist, bemoans the fissuring of the workplace in contemporary Africa and calls on African governments to do more to improve the circumstances of its workers. This issue's 'in-conversation' piece features Deborah Freeman Danquah, the General Secretary of the Union of Informal Workers Associations (UNIWA) in Ghana. UNIWA is unique in that it recognises the fact that the majority of female workers in Ghana, as indeed in many other African countries, make out a living in the informal economy and as a result, are faced with many constraints. The association, therefore, seeks to provide these workers with the benefits of unionisation, one of the key characteristics of decent work according to the International Labour Organization. The conversation discusses the factors that precipitated the formation of the union as well as the benefits that its members have derived from their membership. A review of a biography of Wangari Maathai, Africa's famed environmentalist and the continent's first black female Nobel Prize winner, rounds up the contributions for this issue.

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