WOMEN’S LIVES AND WOMEN’S STRUGGLES
IN RURAL ZIMBABWE

Donna Pankhurst

September 1988

(The original version of this paper was written in 1986 and offers a summary report on fieldwork done between 1983-1984 which is now available in complete form in the author's Ph.D. thesis at Liverpool University (The Dynamics of the Social Relations of Production and Reproduction in a Zimbabwean Communal Area). Helpful comments were received at earlier seminars held at Liverpool, Leeds and York Universities, and from P. Roberts, R. Bush and L. Cliffe. Donna Pankhurst is now a Lecturer at the International Development Centre at Manchester University, but was a Research Assistant on the Food and Famine Project of the Department of Politics, Leeds University, between January 1986 and December 1987.)
ABSTRACT

A village study in a comparatively good ecological zone revealed a broad range of household types. These have been grouped according to a combination of both economic stratification and the type of gender relations within the households. Women in the study sample face similar difficulties to those found throughout rural Shona society in contemporary Zimbabwe. In addition, however, there are different opportunities available to those in the different groups. Where income-opportunities are curtailed, they have to use increasingly secretive and illegitimate means to ensure the well-being of their children, and, to a lesser extent, their own livelihood. As women provide most of the agricultural labour in this area, their actions often have a direct bearing on the ways in which agriculture is practised.

INTRODUCTION

This paper has been written in an attempt to outline the linkages between gender relations and agriculture in rural Zimbabwe. Specifically this will be done by means of a village case-study from one Communal Land (Mangwende), set against a more general background of the Communal Lands and historical changes in Shona gender relations.

It has been suggested that there is a 'Crisis of Social Reproduction in Southern Africa' (Bush, Cliffe and Jansen, 1986). Put simply, this refers to the fact that the system imposed by Colonial governments in the region, i.e. that based on cheap, migrant labour, in which labour 'reserves' feature, is breaking down. This is observable in the numbers of people who are no longer able to survive without outside assistance (although that fact alone does not indicate any fundamental change, or crisis, as African people have often been dispensable in this system inherited from Colonialism). This is a reflection of changes which make it increasingly difficult for people, and ultimately the system itself, to survive. The chances of small-scale farmers producing even a proportion of their subsistence needs, as well as employment opportunities, are declining, whilst at the same time family ties and social networks which acted as a safety-net in the past, are disintegrating.

Discussion of the extent to which this is true across the region is beyond the scope of this paper, but can be informed by this study within one of the countries in the following respects. Some changes which have been taking place have been more disadvantageous to women than men, which is why increasing numbers of women are choosing never to marry or form conventional households (clearly seen in Botswana for some time and apparent in Zambia, Zimbabwe, Lesotho and Swaziland). The case-study does not illustrate this particular effect, but highlights a related predicament of women found across the region: that of widows who live separately from relatives and are frequently in danger of not surviving. Secondly, increasing unemployment means that there are more households where a husband and wife are both resident in the rural home all the time and have very limited resources. This often means that there is a shortage of even basic foodstuffs and these households are particularly vulnerable in droughts. However there is an increasingly polarised struggle between women and men in these households. Thirdly, at a more general level, the potential for agriculture in the Communal Lands to meet the subsistence needs of their populations is being called into question, given the present farming system. These will be examined within the context of the paper and more thoroughly in the final sections.

The concept of a household has been used throughout the study, despite its problematic nature, but I trust my employment of it as a unit of analysis has not prevented me from seeing relations both within and between
households. It was used because it remains a convenient unit and one also that still means something to members themselves. It is a social unit of which people claim unambiguous membership, and which is readily identifiable to everyone else. It is created by marriage, or the termination of one. It may coincide with the unit of production (there are no separate landholdings within households) but often does not. The unit of production is usually composed of the labour of women and children, with capital being supplied by a man. However, the man remains a member of his household, even if he does not contribute anything to the unit of production, and indeed still has rights to the output. It may consist of two but often three or more generation 'families'. Non-related individuals (i.e. people who are not members of the household) may also contribute labour to the unit of production.

Colonial governments identified men as 'heads of households', a term and concept widely accepted in Zimbabwe today. Increasingly women whose husbands are absent for months at a time, or who have completely deserted them, are called de facto heads of households. I have tried to avoid doing this because it seems to me to imply that they have more power than they actually do, and in particular that they have the following: an ultimate veto on decisions about how the factors of production are to be brought together; an ultimate veto over the use of the eventual product from agricultural activity; the security of tenure which was previously invested in a man; and an inalienable and irreversible ownership of the product. None of these need be true for women whose husbands are absent or who have been deserted, as the husband may continue to exercise authority through any of his relatives who live nearby, or are able to visit the woman. Such relatives may also appropriate the woman's resources if it is assumed that the man has abandoned, and thus 'divorced' the woman. The difference between a male head of household and a so-called female head of household, is often that the woman's apparent autonomy is not irreversible and in the event of there being any conflict of interest regarding property, she is likely to lose, as will be demonstrated. Prior to examining gender relations further, however, it is necessary to clarify several facts about Zimbabwe's Communal Lands (CLs) in general and historical changes which have occurred within them.

ZIMBABWE'S COMMUNAL LANDS

Most people (58%) in Zimbabwe today live in CLs (May, 1986). Hence the CLs remain an important area of study for sociologists and political scientists, as well as agronomists. The inhabitants of CLs are often referred to by social scientists as a 'peasantry'. This tends to foster the mistaken assumption by more casual observers that CLs are not much different than models of ancestral lands presented by social scientists elsewhere in Africa. In some ways they couldn't be more different.

The CLs are not now communal, nor are they traditional. Their boundaries and farming systems were specifically the creation of a Colonial regime which imposed a system of migrant labour on a society already in existence, denoting these areas Native Reserves, African Reserves, then Tribal Trust Lands, and finally CLs after independence. The ways in which this designation of land and imposition of a social system were achieved are by now well-documented. An enforced division of land was begun in the 1890s; was formalised in the 1930 Land Apportionment Act, and adjusted under this Act to give approximately 50% each to the African and European populations. This is roughly the pattern of land ownership which remains, although about 35,000 families had moved onto previously European owned land under the Government Resettlement Programme by 1985 and some members of the new black bourgeoisie have purchased some of the 'white' land (generally now referred to as
large-scale commercial farming sector). The white population was only ever a small percentage of the total and the inequality was further compounded by the fact that the land allocated to them was of superior quality, whilst the black population was forced into the so-called Reserves.

The interests articulated by the Colonial state were essentially to obtain labour from the black population, i.e. to 'force them out' of the Reserves, and to protect and promote white farming interests. These things were achieved by a twin policy of imposing taxes on the one hand (thus creating a need to generate cash), and undermining African agriculture on the other. The latter was achieved principally by restricting African producers to the Reserves which were drier and less fertile, as well as being smaller in size, than the land to which African agricultural systems had been adapted. This clearly affected the environmental deterioration which subsequently occurred in these areas, although debate continues as to the weight this denial of land to African peasants should be given compared with other explanatory facts, such as agricultural malpractices and climatic change.

Further means were required to reduce competition between European and African farming and to prevent the black population from meeting its subsistence needs solely through farming. Accordingly, a barrage of legislation was passed in the 1930s and '40s, which implemented a 2-tier pricing system for all important agricultural products. Furthermore, dissent from the most prosperous (tiny) sector of the black population was diffused by enabling it to purchase larger acreages of land in areas designated Native Purchase Areas, once their 'advanced skills' in farming had been adequately demonstrated.

In the 1950s there were attempts by the Todd government to reform the migrant labour system, the key piece of reformist legislation being the Native Land Husbandry Act (NLHA). The aim was to create permanent and separate workers and peasant-farmers amongst the black population. It was resisted by both blacks and whites, although for diametrically opposed reasons. White opposition to these moves was expressed at the next election, which was won by Ian Smith's party. His government repealed the legislation and placed far less emphasis upon trying to improve farming in the Reserves (which then became Tribal Trust Lands). Black opposition was expressed in widespread refusal to comply with the requirements of the Act amongst different classes, including chiefs and landless.

The inheritance at independence then, was of a warped, restricted and crippled 'peasant' sector which had also in many places, suffered long years of the hardships of war. There had been an absence of any effective government administration in many areas for much of the duration of the war: in some cases people remained under the leadership of a chief, in others many decisions were made by guerilla organisations, and in some cases a combination of the two was at work. This generated a great variety of local political experiences and consequently of regulations governing the allocation and use of land in the CLs. The extent of this variety has not yet been documented in any detailed way, and all too often things are assumed not only to be communal and traditional in the CLs, but also fairly uniform. Clearly they are not. It is beyond the scope of this paper to estimate the extent of, say, different types of land-holding and labour relations, which also vary within communities according to differential access to cash and land. But some background to a discussion of these issues may be established by examining the variety within one small area.

HISTORICAL CHANGES IN SHONA GENDER RELATIONS IN CLS

In addition to the changes that took place between households, there were important changes within them. In part these may be explained by the
effects of Colonial Rule, but they were also the outcome of struggles between young and old men (with the state often supporting elders and chiefs) and the ways in which men took advantage of opportunities which were open to them and not to women. These are summarised separately below, taking first the changing importance of lineage relations, followed by the ways in which Customary Law has been used by men. Subsequently consideration is given to two effects of these phenomena, which are relevant to the way agriculture is practised: women's loss of rights to land and the increase in women's workload.

The Importance of Lineage

Women have experienced a lessening, or total, loss of potential support and/or protection from the lineages into which they marry. The Shona are traditionally patrilineal and patrilocal, so a woman's relationships with her husband's family have always been of considerable significance to her. Loss of this support occurred because of the reduced control which lineage elders have had over individual young men. In earlier times, only the elders in a lineage were able to make any decisions regarding cattle. Cattle came to form an important component of the payment of lobola (bridewealth) and even where, or when, this was not so, cattle remained valued assets. Thus the elders had considerable control over marriage arrangements and the inheritance of highly valued assets. This formed the material basis for the social control they had over young men. As the latter were able, and were forced, to earn cash in their own right, they gained new prestige in the community, but also became more powerful because they were not beholden to their elders for lobola cattle or other material assets. There were repeated government attempts throughout the colonial period to strengthen the authority of chiefs and elders in order to gain greater control over the young, male workforce, but the trend towards young men's independence from their elders was not reversed.

In addition, men increasingly lived away from their relatives, both because they had to, and because state policies restricted their access to land in the vicinity of their families. The implications for women of this spatial and social distance of their husbands from their families were complex, but in many ways negative. There have been occasions when, and still are circumstances in which, women in Zimbabwe (as elsewhere in Africa) experience an element of liberation in living separately from their husbands' families. Many women, however, experience a loss of rights in this situation, which are to do with the removal of the possibility of complaining about the husband's behaviour to the only people regarded as appropriate, i.e. specific members of his family, and a lessening of social controls on the behaviour of men generally. The grounds on which members of a man's family would once use their authority and influence to change his behaviour would be if a man were excessively violent; demanded sex during pregnancy, menstruation or for a period after the birth of a child; did not allow an interval of between 2 and 4 years between conceptions; made excessive demands on her labour; did not work himself; did not provide basic subsistence (assuming he had the resources to do so) for her and their children, and perhaps most importantly, if he demanded or initiated divorce. Many women now find that they have no support if faced with any of these activities: they have found no alternatives to his relatives and still regard this as the appropriate form of remonstration. Inevitably then, many feel isolated and remain compelled to hide problems from unrelated people, rarely even sharing the burden of work with other women.

Customary Law, Divorce and Widowhood

Customary Law in Zimbabwe, as elsewhere in Africa, is a set of laws created by a colonial state in order to codify its interpretation of the
'customs' of the subjugated peoples, insofar as they are not repugnant to its 'natural sense' of justice and morality (the so-called 'repugnancy clause'). In effect they make static a fluid series of negotiations and prevent adaptation to changing circumstances. This meant that the prejudices and ignorance of European officials and their informants became embodied in this set of laws, but also, the very mechanisms whereby disputes were settled were fundamentally altered. Some women and men both used the Native Commissioners' courts to arbitrate in divorce proceedings and disputes about lobola payments from the early days of Colonial rule. Previously all these disputes had been settled by both families or headman or chief. (Women were disadvantaged in all these situations but did try to use the new opportunity presented by a change in the system.) Marriage came to resemble more of a contract between the husband and his wife's family, and frequently just between the husband and the father of the wife, rather than between 2 lineages as previously.

The history of marriage in Zimbabwe is complex, but one important outcome that must be noted here is that it is now much easier for men to divorce women than vice versa, and would appear to be easier than ever it was before. Men are able to 'divorce' women (from a customary or civil marriage) ostensibly according to Customary Law, even though it is frequently demonstrable that the conditions under which this is done are illegal and not according to custom. The Legal Age of Majority Act (LAMA) 1983, and the Matrimonial Causes Act, 1985, were expected by many to remedy this situation by increasing women's legal rights. There is, however, no inherent reason why these laws should not be ignored and applied in ways which are disadvantageous to women, just as those which do exist in Customary Law have been. Moreover the reasons why women themselves, particularly rural women, do not exercise these rights are many, but relate to a widespread ignorance about what the laws actually say, women's structural dependence upon men as minors under Customary Law (General Law prior to LAMA) and their lack of economic independence.

The dissolution of marriage by death, rather than divorce, may once have been more frequent, but widows now often find themselves in a similar state of destitution to divorcees. Both may be left with no assets at all, frequently finding property, which they considered to be their own during marriage, being appropriated on the termination of the marriage. In the case of divorcees this is by the husband, whereas widows often lose their property to their deceased husband's relatives. There is a Succession Bill going through Parliament this session which is intended to prevent the latter occurring, but as with the Matrimonial Causes Act, there are ambiguities within it which mean that rural women will not experience much change, and the reasons remain for many women not using laws which are in their interests.

Women's property rights under Customary Law were defined as mavoko property (that earned with the hands) and particular beasts which were given to her in relation to marriage payments or inherited from female relations. These are often ignored when a marriage is terminated. This is justified by men who offer a definition of mavoko property which is limited to the sources of income which were simply stated as examples when the definition was first used in courts, i.e. the money or goods a woman earns from herbalism, midwifery or pot-making, and occasionally stretching this to include a small amount which might be made from selling vegetables. Women who earn income by any other means find that such property or cash is socially defined as belonging to their husbands.

Therefore there are several causes behind women's loss of property rights on divorce or widowhood, as well as their comparative lack of ability to divorce men and their vulnerability to being divorced. Firstly the
colonial state provided an opportunity for men to redefine the terms under which the dissolution of marriage took place. Secondly, whilst acting outside the law, men cited 'tradition' as embodied in Customary Law as justification for negating women's rights. Thirdly, women were legal minors prior to LAMA and their legal status under Customary Law remains ambiguous. Thus they were disadvantaged before the courts whilst being unable to challenge divorce which takes place outside the courts.

This simplified analysis forms the background to some of the case study material, which nonetheless contains some examples of how women challenge these conditions. What is beyond dispute, however, is that many women, particularly rural women, do not believe that it is possible for them to divorce men. They live in fear of being divorced or widowed because of the likelihood of destitution there being, as well the probability that they will not obtain the custody of their children. This fear restricts the ability of women to bargain or use other tactics to make material or other demands on their husbands during marriage, and consequently a husband's or a father's responsibility, as socially defined, is less than what it is alleged to have been in the past.

**Women's Loss of Rights to Land**

In many places in Zimbabwe there has been a total loss of land for married women. The erosion of land rights occurred gradually but within the context of State restrictions on the amount of resources available to both women and men (thereby intensifying competition between them) and various state measures to restructure land rights.

Pre- and early colonial land rights for women were contingent upon their being, or having been, married. This entitled them to a minimum amount on which they were expected to grow specific food crops, but there is evidence that some women were also able to grow sufficient grain with which to trade.

A wife had certain obligations regarding the cultivation of her husband's fields and providing labour for other tasks, which he or his mother defined, and providing food for the family. These had to take priority over any venture which she herself might define, but nonetheless some women were able to get income from trading foodstuffs. Widows too were allocated small portions of land and if a divorcee returned to her parents' home then she might be entitled to a similar plot. These rights become blurred by general processes and eventually were erased in many areas.

Women's fields were used for two types of crop: high protein food crops, such as beans and nuts, which were generally not grown by men, and staple grains (both of which might be traded on a small scale). Where women were left to manage the household affairs, in the absence of migrant husbands, the distinction between women's and men's fields which were suitable for staple grains sometimes became blurred, and the farm was seen in effect as a joint venture. In situations where husbands were present for longer periods and/or retained greater control over agricultural decisions, general impoverishment might be the cause of this collapse in the definition of women's separate fields, where people could hardly grow sufficient grain to meet subsistence needs.

Alternatively, where prices for grain were more favourable than for women's traditional food crops, a decision to abandon these for more widely commoditised grains such as maize may have been agreed by women and men or might have been imposed by men. The NLHA allocated a new right to men: that of individual title, and gave no corresponding rights to women, nor did it embody any conditional rights for wives. Hence there was no legal resource for women to prevent men's restriction of their access to land. Widows and divorcees were supposed, under the Act, to be allocated a plot half the
standard size given to men (although they could not inherit land or pass this on to their children), but it is doubtful whether many women obtained them. Although there has been a proliferation of different types of land tenure since then, in many areas the rights allocated under the NLHA have been retained and in some areas (including the case-study in question) patterns of land tenure resemble those implemented under the NLHA.

Many women in contemporary Zimbabwe complain about the loss of land on which they were able to grow crops of their choice (which would be more nutritious foodstuffs) and the fact that their produce from all the fields of staple food and/or mān̄ cash crops (usually maize in many areas, but increasingly cotton) is controlled by men. Widows are rarely given much land and are often left destitute, as are many divorcees as described above.

Changes in Women's Work

The experience of migrant labour enforced changes in the allocation of labour within households. Where men's labour was exploited in the capitalist sector (principally on farms and mines) there was a consequent shortage of labour in the Reserves. In pre-colonial society men cleared new land, hunted, built and maintained buildings and fences and cared for cattle. All but the last of these tasks gradually diminished in importance in many areas during the colonial era, as people were forced to remain sedentary on a restricted area of land and hence buildings did not need to be frequently reconstructed, land needed clearing less often and hunting became less viable. Men also assisted in other agricultural tasks when there was greatest need, such as at peak weeding and harvest times, and also undertook all ploughing when this became the common method of cultivation. The reduction in the amount of 'men's' work necessary under colonialism was compounded by their frequent and prolonged absences so that it became common for men simply to undertake ploughing and land clearing where necessary. Today they frequently do neither.

The shortfall in labour was largely met by an intensification of women's labour and gradually women's work came to be seen as being anything that needed doing in the home and fields, whilst men's work increasingly became solely to earn cash. Hence women complain that they receive very little help when their husbands are present, as the men consider farmwork to be 'her' work. In efforts to reform African agriculture, prior to the NLHA, the Colonial Government was frequently concerned about this burden of work on women; bureaucrats complained that women were unable to change the pattern of agriculture to become more efficient simply because of their burden of work. Administrators recognized that where men were present this was sometimes possible. Some assumed this was because the men had received some education and that it was in spite of women's 'backwardness', whilst others recorded a more sensitive (and revealing) appreciation of women's burden of work. In any case women were rarely able to use their increased responsibility to their advantage and women in this situation today comment that they remain powerless to control the products of the farm or even, at times, to decide how to use their own labour.

Amongst households with greater access to cash (usually in the form of remittances from the husband) labour is often purchased locally from other households, examples of which appear in the case-study. This access to others' labour creates a different situation for some women, although they experience the fear of divorce or widowhood in similar ways to their poorer sisters. Traditionally widows who chose to remain with their husbands' lineages might gain access to other members' labour, although never on a large scale and this would depend upon their standing within the family. All women tend to have some say in how their children's labour is used whilst they remain living together, although the massive increases in the frequency of school attendance since independence has made this a less valuable resource.
THE CASE STUDY

The village is located near Musami, approximately 70 km NE from Harare. It is in Natural Region 2b, and so has comparatively good rainfall. Nonetheless, the soils are sandy and the whole area is scattered with granite outcrops of rock, ranging from boulders just appearing at the surface, to towering hills. The site was not farmed until 1959, prior to which it had remained unused. It was regarded by the Assistant Native Commissioner as being too hilly and rocky for 'native' occupation, and subsequently it became designated as grazing land for the sub-chief. The village was established by an individual who bribed the sub-chief to allow him to assume 'ownership' and then 'sold' parcels of land to people from the surrounding areas over the next few years. Such contraventions of the NHLA were apparently widespread, but it is interesting to note that some of the land rights acquired in this way resemble those which were designated under the Act, such as the fact that land holdings were regarded as being owned by the person who 'bought' them (usually a male head of household), although he is not allowed to sell them; one may not claim anyone else's land, even if this remains unused for long periods; and no married women have separate fields of their own.

The proximity of the village to Harare, and the frequent bus service between them makes it 'untypical' and increases the likelihood of frequent contact between migrant men and resident wives. It also increases the possibilities for women to travel to Harare to see their husbands. Women who live in the village do not migrate for employment as there are very few opportunities open to them and they assess the risks involved as being too great. Of the 47 landholders (only 1 per household) only 33 have any member living there. The other 14 all live away and wives in these households have migrated permanently. They now have no contact with the village and most of their land remains unfarmed. (A small amount is lent to several women, apparently for no payment and to unrelated people. There are also discussions being held by the village committee to negotiate the use of this land for others.) Hence the study is based on 33 households which farm and have someone resident (217 people in all).

Within the village population, there are 'clusters' or 'groups' of households according to certain economic factors and gender relations. I had a preconceived notion of such groupings, which closely resembled 'types' of households referred to by villagers themselves. Moreover, in their economic aspects, at least, they are similar to the clusters identified by Ray Bush and Roger Leys in Masvingo and Chivi (areas of much poorer ecological quality). I must stress however that the groups are not static, in that households may move from one to another, although movement is not cyclic in any straightforward way.

Access to off-farm income is by far the most important distinguishing feature. Here the selling of labour per se is not necessarily an indicator of poverty, as members of households in the richest cluster sell their labour, albeit directly to capital outside the peasant sector (as Bush and Leys describe). Remittances from this labour relation in turn often pay for the employment of non-household members, and more generally a household's access to sources of off-farm income, and the conditions under which this is undertaken, in turn affect other labour and gender relations within the household as well as the general level of economic status of its members. Typically, the earning of off-farm income occurs where a woman stays in the village, whilst her husband works in town or elsewhere, and sends or brings part of his payment to her and/or to the unit of production as a whole. The remittances rarely take the form of regular, cash allowances, but are usually a combination of cash in lump sums and goods purchased by the man in town, often without consultation with his wife. Calculation of the total value of
remittances is difficult both because of the inaccuracy of recall over long periods of time, and because of different interpretations of this value by men and women in the same household. Instead I have identified certain resources which households receiving remittances are in a better position to obtain, and a range of capital goods for the purchase of which cash is required in greater amounts than has been possible to generate in this area from the sale of crops alone. These are:

1. At least 4 acres of land, which is identified by villagers as being 'the amount you need before you are poor'. Land can no longer be bought, but migrants are in a better position to negotiate the loan of some from those who live permanently in town and leave their land untilled.

2. Cattle are important both as indicators of wealth and as means of production. They are far more frequently purchased than inherited here.

3. Vegetable gardens are established in pockets of vlei soil near sources of water. Access to this land is by the same arrangement as arable land.

4. Scotch carts and ploughs are both important means of production.

5. The employment of non-family labour in specific forms requires a considerable amount of disposable income.

A description of each group is presented below, in the light of the common situation of women, but also indicating the differences in their experiences within the different groups.

Group One

The seven households in this group have all the resources and capital goods listed above and consequently are the richest. Typically, the husband has relatively secure employment, or is self-employed (the main identifying feature of Bush and Ley's group) and is comparatively skilled and well-educated. The employment of labour by the household is paid for by his remittances and takes two forms:

1. Permanent, full-time labourers who are always male and generally not local. They live and eat with the household members like domestic servants* and are paid a uniform local rate which is well below the legal minimum wage. In a sense these men might be seen to be 'replacing' the labour of the migrant husband in that the latter rarely does any farm work when visiting, even ploughing. *(i.e. they are not accorded the same respect as kin and often sleep in inferior shelters, do more domestic chores and are sometimes given inferior food.)

2. Casual, part-time labourers. These are usually women from other households in the village and may be paid in a variety of ways.

In the husband's absence, the wife has to make all the day-to-day decisions about who should do what in the home and farm. The result in most cases is a well-planned agricultural enterprise using fertilisers, hybrid seeds and, in one case, herbicides. These households produce by far the largest harvests, market the largest amounts, and, I suggest, are typical of those households which produced the 'miracle' crop of 1985. In some cases the wife controls the product of the farm, as well as the labour process. She may receive the cheque from the Grain Marketing Board in her own name, and may even place it in her own bank account. This situation in turn affords these women greater opportunity to earn income in other ways because they are free to organise their time as they please and have access to someone else's labour. Typical projects include growing and selling vegetables, poultry-keeping and sewing.

Thus they appear to have considerable autonomy in their daily lives. However, some qualifications need to be made. It is not threatening to these
men to allow women relative autonomy in the spheres of housework, childcare, crop production, or the use of any cash from this and other income generating projects, because women generally use this autonomy in ways which are pleasing to men. This is autonomy in the sense that these are spheres of activity which are free from the control of men, but only because men allow them to be: men still have the power to curtail them and a wife who tries to use this autonomy in ways which are not pleasing to her husband does not usually succeed.

This is well illustrated by an anecdote about a woman who had even greater day-to-day autonomy than other women in this group. She had decided to invest the bulk of the income from cropsales in a knitting machine so that she would be able to make garments to sell in her 'spare' time. This would have entailed a visit to Botswana or RSA, to which her husband at first objected. After a series of arguments and attempts to persuade him, she won his 'permission' (not formally required) to obtain a passport. However as the time of her impending visit approached, along with the cold weather, the husband kept suggesting that she should buy a leather coat for herself. She felt that she had argued a lot lately and so did not want to insist that a woollen coat would have been more practical. She was more worried that she could not afford both the coat and the visit to buy the machine. When the cheque came we went to Harare to bank it and he met us at the bus station. He guided us to an expensive 'tourist' shop, chose the coat he had in mind, and her income was suddenly spent. At the time he said that he would give her money to buy her machine, but she had to wait until she had the money from the following season before she was able to make the trip, for which he never gave her any money.

The anecdote reveals several things, I think. The husband wishes publicly to be able to exert his power over the woman's decisions and considers that ultimately he has a right to decide how she should spend her money. Secondly it suggests that the women is faced with such opposition that she considers her best tactic to be deference, which in this case, although not always, is a reflection of her perception of her own powerlessness. Thirdly, the man's desire to exercise a veto on this particular venture may have stemmed not only from the fact that she would be exercising far more independence than before in travelling alone to South Africa, but also that ultimately the knitting machine might provide her with material security.

In any case, the women's vulnerability to their husbands' decisions remains because all women may become destitute upon divorce or widowhood, as described earlier. Common strategies to lessen this threat are to 'bank' money or goods, either in the name, or actually at the home, of children or members of her natal family.

The people in the households in this group are unlikely to be in any of the other groups defined here in the future, except that of 'poor widows', because their stock of capital resources would still distinguish them from others even in the event of loss of male employment.

**Group Two**

Leys identified a 2nd 'cluster' where members have off-farm income. They define the difference as being that the 2nd has greater insecurity of employment. Whilst this is a factor common amongst the twelve households in Group Two, the distinguishing feature for me is rather the amount of resources which have reached the rural homestead. Hence this group of twelve households includes some where the man is employed in relatively well-paid, secure job but does not, or has not yet, remitted as many resources as those in group 1. This of course generally means that the people in this group are younger, but they will not inevitably be able to move into Group One - they may never have access to the same amounts of cash or land. All have less than 4 acres of land, and some migrant workers simply choose not to remit much of the money they earn.
Women in these households use various strategies to earn income for themselves, wherever possible in the same ways as those in Group One. However, they have fewer resources to start with, so the opportunities are curtailed. They also more frequently attempt to increase the amount of income received from their husbands. A woman will do this usually by denying that she has earned money (which he would assume should be spent on things he usually pays for); or by deceiving him about the price of things he has agreed to pay for.

Some of these households are able to employ labour, but only of the casual type and only at peak times of labour demand. Again, husbands do very little agricultural work when visiting.

**Group Three**

Groups Three and Four are composed of those households receiving no significant remittances. They are divided so that there are those with (Group Three) and those without (Group Four), an adult male usually present in the rural homestead. This is principally because this circumstance makes for very different gender relations within these households, for obvious reasons. In addition, however, there is also some justification for this division in terms of economic stratification as those in group four do have fewer resources available to them, especially labour, as described below.

Group Three is the only group where a man is usually present in each household all the time. The men in these nine households are generally unskilled, poorly educated and have only ever had short-term, casual, very infrequent employment. There is a wide range of ages in this group. Generally speaking, farming is identified as the main form of livelihood, even when this is not actually true in terms of annual cash income. Several households do not grow sufficient to market any crops at all. For some this is because they only have very small plots of land, but usually it is a shortage of cash which prevents any increase in production (by use of hybrid seeds, fertiliser, timely and efficient ploughing). Overall there are far fewer resources available to people here than in groups 1 and 2 and hence competition over these resources within the households is fierce and often brutal.

It is acknowledged by both men and women that women do more work: with the help of children they provide almost all of the labour for agriculture. A man's work is seen as being 'to have a job' and anything else he does is perceived as a 'favour' to his wife. She has no actual rights to his labour and is usually unable to insist that he helps her. So it is common for men in this group to contribute very little in terms of cash or labour. This does vary on an individual basis of course - particularly with regard to age, as older men often help more than younger ones. But it is important to recognise that even when the man does make an important contribution in terms of labour, this is seen as 'assistance' to his wife and not really as being his work. Nonetheless the 'farm' is still seen as belonging to the man. Moreover he is able to ensure that its product is used in ways which he chooses, ultimately through the use of physical violence.

By way of contrast, women are expected to perform all 'domestic' duties (including the provision of sexual services); all the work in the fields (with help from children) and to provide food for everyone. If they fail in any of these, in practice they may be divorced. The desperateness of their predicament means that these women use every strategy to gain access to more resources - ranging from subservience, through various forms of deception, to occasional actual physical violence. However, the threat of divorce and its consequences generally prevents women from rebelling very openly or persistently. They do not have the protection from their husbands' lineages that some of their mothers and grandmothers once had; have few means with which to fight and have found few alternative means of support. They have no rights to land, nor to the products of their labour on their husbands' land. Prostitution,
another common strategy of desperate women, is very dangerous (in that the consequences of discovery are at least physically violent, if they don't result in divorce and consequent loss of children) but risked by some who seek customers amongst the men passing through the small township nearby.

The only relatively successful strategy is to work on a casual basis for the households in group 1 and 2 (which men also sometimes do, although much less commonly). This requires that they withdraw their own labour from their husbands' fields at peak times of labour requirement with predictable consequences for the quality of farming there (planting and harvesting late, weeding not done properly). Again there are risks involved in this as it is usually done deceptively, in order to increase the chances of keeping control over the income generated. Alternatively, or sometimes additionally, women demand payment in kind - as clothes for themselves or the children, or perhaps food, as this is less easily appropriated by the husbands. They may also receive assistance from the female 'employers' both in sustaining the deception and, much less frequently, in keeping money safe.

This struggle over the control of resources is often heightened by polarised ambitions for the uses to which money should be put. Stereotypically, men often want to buy meat and beer, principally for their own consumption, whilst women try to ensure that their children are well-fed and clothed. However, despite the extremely exploitative nature of this situation for many women, they prefer, like migrant labourers who continue to seek work under terrible conditions, to stay within its confines than face the options outside marriage and the household.

**Group Four**

The five households in Group Four are composed entirely of women who live without men, and in three cases contain 2 polygynous wives who have been widowed. The women are referred to simply as 'ambuya' in Shona and 'widows' in English. The former tells nothing of marital status, and the latter is misleading because the group does include divorced women. Moreover the women have experienced diverse economic situations in the past. There are women who have at one time been in situations similar to women in all the other groups, but they all appear to be in very similar circumstances now.

In this particular village, the elected village committee has ensured that women who are widowed retain access to the land registered in their deceased husband's name until their own death. This provides some of the women with greater security than they would find in villages elsewhere, where they may only retain access to a minute plot of land. One elderly divorcee was also able to purchase a small piece of land when she arrived at the village in 1963.

Other writers identify elderly, divorced and widowed women as being in the poorest group of any rural study in Zimbabwe, and some have noted that their poverty does not always, or even typically, stem from an insufficient access to land, but from a shortage of labour. It seems (from ethnographic accounts and individuals' memories) that widows in particular were once able to command labour from others, but are generally now no longer able to do so. Divorced women lose access to their children and have no rights to anyone else's labour. Hence all these women's strategies to survive are geared around increasing their cash incomes in order to purchase labour and other commodities considered essential, even food. However the scope for doing this is small. They are generally considered too old for prostitution, although some of them do feel compelled to adopt this strategy to earn even the tiniest amount of money, food or even just beer. (Being older and considered less attractive than the women in Group 3 they earn even less from this.) Generally they have no gardens and so cannot grow and sell vegetables (and of course
have to purchase any that they eat). Similarly, when brewing beer to sell, the income received is less than might appear as they have to buy the rapoko and maize from others in the first place. Some undertake light work for others (eg shelling maize at harvest-time), either for money or food.

They do occasionally receive piecemeal help such as presents of food and wood from neighbours, or the Catholic Women's Club, but this is often only in times of sickness and is not usually given on a regular basis.

GENDER RELATIONS, ECONOMIC STRATIFICATION AND AGRICULTURE

The CLs, still within 'the system' of migrant labour set up under colonialism, are intended by the government to serve two functions: to be the site of reproduction for most of the population; and to provide the environmental resources for the fostering of the development of a peasant class producing crops for the market. It is arguable that in parts of the country, and for some sections of the population, neither are any longer possible under the existing farming systems because of reduced access to employment, environmental degradation and higher ratios of people and livestock to units of land. However this case-study is more relevant to an exploration of the ways in which these two functions are being fulfilled.

It is clear that, in this instance, those households which produce the bulk of marketed crops (principally maize) are those which invest off-farm income in the farm (groups one and two). Moreover, income from employment by these households is an important resource for others. Assuming the form of production remains unaltered in any radical way, any reduction in employment opportunities outside the CLs must have a direct and negative effect on both the ability of peasants to market large quantities and the ability of people to ensure their very survival within the CLs. The extent of this effect remains unclear but the connection between off-farm income and peasant production is one which is important in informing the range of options open to the government with regard to future plans for CLs.

Meshed with this pattern of relationships between households is the variety of gender relations found within them. Historically, gender relations have worked to women's disadvantage in that many suffer material insecurity because of the possible implications of divorce or widowhood. Whenever alternatives are perceived as being possible for women, they will adopt these (such as employment in town) rather than remain in a conventional rural household. In the long-term this might mean a loss of the young, most active labour force from the CLs.

In the shorter term, women's perceived material insecurity within marriage, and hence their lack of a vested interest in CL agriculture, makes them more likely to resist attempts by others within the household to use their labour for such a purpose. This is particularly so where women's control over resources is most severely curtailed, that is, where total household resources are very small and the male head is present and attempting to control and use them in ways which are different from those preferred by the woman. Where women's and men's interests conflict to such an extent, it cannot be assumed that the household's resources, particularly labour, will be used in a way which is most conducive to crop production, even within the given farming system.

We have seen that in circumstances where there are relatively more resources and the adult man is absent, women do have a considerable amount of autonomy in their daily lives over the expenditure of income which they generate. This often means that they are very industrious in the fields as well as in other income-generating projects. Moreover they are often able to command a considerable amount of financial responsibility from their husbands for both the unit of production and the reproductive needs of the household.
members. Nevertheless, it is important to note that such autonomy is conditional upon a woman's fulfillment of her wifely duties, which include spending money (regardless of its source) only in ways in which are acceptable to her husband.

On the other hand, in circumstances of fewer resources and where there is a man present in the rural home, conflict often arises within the household around decisions about how resources should be used. In particular, husbands and wives often engage in bitter, if not always public, competition to control the limited resources available to them. In this situation women have no legitimate means by which to resist men's appropriation of resources, even in the event of his choosing to divert them from the satisfaction of basic subsistence needs of household members. In their attempts to circumvent the men's appropriation of so-called shared income, women may secretly withdraw their labour from the husband's fields in order to earn income in a variety of other ways (albeit at the risk of physical abuse and/or divorce). This practice necessarily limits the scope for any improvement in agricultural practices which are labour-intensive, or for that matter for any 'development projects' which do not provide women with income or resources which they can control themselves.

Finally some estimation needs to be made about the extent to which women are divided by their different economic or class positions, or united by the disadvantages they share as a gender-class. Given that the overwhelming difficulty that women perceive in their lives is material insecurity, any differential abilities to overcome this is of great significance. Women in Zimbabwe who are opting to increase their control over resources by not being married generally do not do this within CLs and so have not been discussed here, although it is worth noting that there are women from all classes who take this option. As we have seen, there are very few opportunities for women to increase their security whilst remaining within the CLs and their ability to leave depends on many factors which are not all class related (e.g. proximity to urban centres, level of education, age, presence of friends or relations elsewhere).

Amongst those who remain, there is a considerable difference in the daily experience of control over resources and physical comfort, with women who have wealthier husbands often living in better conditions, and having considerable day-to-day control of resources, including their own labour and its product. All women who remain married in CLs, however, do face the possible withdrawal of such control and exposure to violence and poverty in the event of the husband choosing to impose this. The insufficiency of their legal rights, inability to exercise those which they do have, and the breakdown of social networks, make women's common vulnerability extreme. These are often perceived as being of greater significance to their problems than the class position of their husbands.

Notes

1. The selected Communal Land falls within Mashonaland East Province. References made to 'tradition' and changes in society refer principally to the people who inhabit the Mashonaland Provinces and who are now referred to as being 'Shona'.

2. The most useful summary is R. Bush and L. Cliffe, 1984


4. The circumstances under which a woman could solicit assistance from her husband's lineage members are explored by J.F. Holleman, 1952, pp 321, 323, 351-3; and M. Bourdillon, 1982, p 45.

5. For a detailed description of this, see J. May, 1983, pp 11, 40-44.

7. For a description of how divorce and inheritance on widowhood took place outside the legal framework, see J. May, op.cit., pp 54-7, 80-81, 89-95.

8. Under the Matrimonial Causes Act 1986, women married under the Marriage Act (i.e. by civil rites) are able to sue for divorce on more grounds than previously (for both spouses these have now become 'irretrievable breakdown and illness or continuous unconsciousness') but are also liable to be divorced on these grounds. Women in customary marriages still face divorce under the same conditions as before the Act, and those in unregistered marriages are not touched by this change. Divorce from either type of legal marriage is now subject to the court's discretion regarding the distribution of property and custody of children. Guidelines for this within the Act have given women greater potential control over property and child custody, and, as such, make it potentially more costly for men to divorce women. Women who are 'divorced' by extra-legal procedures (from any type of marriage) will not be affected by the Act unless they choose to take the case to court themselves.

This condition also exists in the proposed Succession Bill: the legal advantages for women can only be taken by the women themselves. Without massive publicity it seems that such laws will not change the situation for most rural women, for whom some protection has already existed in Customary Law and which is increased in these two new laws, because this would require that they take the initiative and take the case to court. As yet many women have little faith that their cases would be heard sympathetically, or that it will not cost them a great deal financially.

9. See J May, op.cit., pp. 65-8

10. See, for instance, J. May, op.cit., pp 26-7; and J. Holleman, op.cit., p.10.

11. Many complaints by women that they cannot decide what is to be planted are to be found throughout a report by the Zimbabwe Women's Bureau, 1981, and the Ministry of Community Development and Women's Affairs, 1981.

12. For a description of men's traditional tasks, see M. Bourdillon, op.cit., pp 69-70.

13. Many studies have illustrated this tendency (and it is one of women's complaints found frequently in the reports cited in note 11) although it is not alleged that no men ever do any field work.

14. More complaints by women on this theme are to be found in the two reports cited above.

15. For instance, a report in NADA, 1963, p 108, suggested that 'the women are either elderly and infirm or burdened with the care of children. They have not the time or energy to improve their standard of farming... The primitive agricultural methods which are all that the predominantly female cultivators have had time or need to use will not give the desired result. Also, in 1948 the Director of Native Agriculture remarked to the Chief Native Commissioner that, 'more food would be produced if a large number of Reserve Natives now in outside employment returned to their homes, for under present conditions with 70 per cent of Reserve Natives in outside employment the bulk of the crop production in Reserves is left to the women and children under whom the methods used are necessarily shiftless, due to the fact that the women are more than fully engaged in performing the duties of the household and kraal, such as carrying water, gathering
wood, cooking, looking after the children as well as livestock, so has little time to look after crops. Seeds are scattered, broadcast in mixtures, weeds are permitted to grow freely, and because of these deplorable methods crop yields are low. As our workers return home during the growing season, we're becoming more mechanised'.

17. R Leys, 1986

'Customary Law' Used Against Women: A Note

I kept this section as brief as possible so as not to make the paper too unwieldy but some additional information should perhaps be offered.

1. Divorce in Zimbabwe refers to separation and abandonment, as well as legal divorce. Women's vulnerability to 'divorce' is increased in two ways. Firstly by the ease with which society accept such illegal actions and secondly by frequency with which 'Customary Law' is cited as justifications for the rejection and abandonment of women and the appropriation of their assets by ex-husbands upon divorce. Hence this discussion is about the uses to which Customary Law is put, rather than what is actually dictates. This is an analysis used by Joan May, in Zimbabwean Women in Customary and Colonial Law.

2. Similarly, with regard to a husband and father's responsibility for the subsistence needs of the household members, the letter of Customary Law in fact is much more demanding on men than the way it is practiced. Yet in a situation where children are unkempt and hungry, this might be offered by the husband as grounds to divorce the wife, either to a court or peer group.

3. The definition of a woman's income under traditional law is restricted to the cattle which she inherits from female relatives, those she is supposed to be given by her son-in-law, and 'maroko' property. 'Maroko' property, meaning that earned with the Lands, has been interpreted to mean limited to that generated by midwifery, herbalism and pot-making. None of these occupations are very lucrative, nor very common in Zimbabwe today. Joan May also cites cases where wives working in the capitalist sector have been unable to retain property and funds generated from their own income upon divorce.

APPENDIX

The conclusions drawn in this paper refer to at least 3 areas of debate which cannot be explored at length here, but simply identified.

1. The 'successful' Zimbabwean peasantry is being held up as a model for Africa. Massive increases in marketed crops are seen as having been in response to improved marketing and extension services in an environment of good rains and high, guaranteed prices. However there are of course enormous regional and local variations to this impression, not the least startling of which is that more than 90% of the marketed Communal Land maize crop for 1985 came the Mashonaland Provinces. The case-study presented falls within Mashonaland and so is useful in indicating some examples of local inequality.

2. At Leeds University (Politics Department and the Centre for Development Studies) there has been a series of discussions referred to as the Crisis of Social Reproduction in southern Africa. Put simply these discussions
have highlighted similarities across the region, with regard to changes in the institution of migrant labour. They have focussed not only on the undermining of the reproduction of the systems as a whole, but also that of particular social relations. These changes have, in turn, led to the actual inability of some individuals to survive, i.e. their physical reproduction has become threatened, or is no longer possible.

Across the region, for instance, widows who often live separately from relatives are in danger of not surviving. Increasing unemployment means that there are more households where a husband and wife are both resident in the rural home all the time and have very limited resources (like Group 3 in the case-study). This often means that there is a shortage of even basic foodstuffs and these households are particularly vulnerable in drought. Moreover there is an increasingly polarised struggle between women and men in these groups. Also, the changes which have been taking place have benefitted men more than women. This is the reason behind increasing members of women choosing never to marry and form conventional households clearly seen in Botswana for some time and apparent in Zambia, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, and Swaziland.

Some implications of these changes for the States in the region may be mentioned, it can no longer be assumed that reproduction of the population will take place successfully: there are still places where actual survival is threatened. There is increasing landlessness, with no concomitant increase in alternative means of income or survival. These 2 factors combined with the increasingly common phenomenon of women choosing to avoid being married and staying in a rural home combine to create a strong desire amongst an increasingly large proportion of the population to live in town. So far the responses of States have been to provide drought relief and food-for-work schemes, with some qualified success in preventing starvation on a massive scale during the drought. In addition there has been increasing discussion (particularly in Zimbabwe) about alternative strategies for peasant agriculture with a view to making it more productive. On the other hand, as in other parts of Africa (Mozambique, Tanzania, Kenya) there has been strong State action to prevent people from settling in, and actually removing them from towns. (One facet of this has been the condemnation of "unproductive men", i.e. unemployed men who remain in towns, and unmarried women).

3. There remains much uncertainty on the part of the Zimbabwean Government about which policies should be adopted for agriculture, particularly within the CLs. The overall stated aim, like that of some other southern African states (Mozambique and Angola) is that of a progression towards 'Socialist Transformation'. Detailed plans under consideration, however, have varying potential effects at the local level and a range of alternative implications for women in particular.

An example is the proposed Communal Lands Bill would probably increase the level of proletarianisation/landlessness, although it might also increase the level of total marketed output. Once women cannot get access to land through marriage it may be that they will not many at all in increasing numbers as there are so many other disadvantages to being married. However, the ability to purchase land, if they are able to obtain sufficient funds, could conceivably lead to an increase in the number of female headed households if women choose to invest their funds in buying land (as in Uganda).

The reliance on considerable sums of off-farm income to ensure 'successful' peasant farming calls into question the appropriateness of the regulations in the Resettlement programme, which forbids settlers to simultaneously hold employment elsewhere. (Some of the particular implications of Resettlement for women are described in S. Jacobs, ROAPE 27/28 and SOAS seminar 3.12.85).
The Zimbabwean Government has had the opportunity to learn from Mozambique the dangers of not ensuring that there are goods for peasants to purchase, but in working towards the transition to socialism, it still faces the problem of what to do about the households on the edge of survival and gender relations within households which prevent the upgrading of agriculture.

Select Bibliography

M Bourdillon, The Shona People, Mambo Press, Gweru, Zimbabwe, 1982
J F Holleman, Shona Customary Law, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1952
R Leys, 'Drought and Drought Relief in Southern Zimbabwe', in P Lawrence (ed), op.cit.: 258-274
Ministry of Community Development and Women's Affairs (Republic of Zimbabwe), Report on the Situation of Women, 1981
Zimbabwe Women's Bureau, We Carry a Heavy Load, Harare, 1981