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Sigrun Helmfrid

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The overall aim of this study has been to interrogate female agency in the domestic economy of smallholder cotton farming. Based on detailed empirical material, the thesis addresses the following interrelated research questions: How were the smallholder domestic economies organized and how did they function? What were the mechanisms for economic inequality and social stratification? To what extent did women benefit from cotton farming? What economic strategies were available to women? And finally, how could female agency be conceptualized in relation to the domestic unit under male headship. The thesis is based on an ethnographic fieldwork that was carried out in a village in western Burkina Faso in the mid-1990s. Although much has changed since then, the study is more than just a historic contribution to the ethnography on West African cotton farming. Focusing as it does on the internal organization of the domestic economies of farmers, with special attention to gender and other intersecting power relations, it provides essential background knowledge, empirical as well as theoretical, for understanding the livelihoods of contemporary cotton farmers.

The thesis is divided into two parts. Part one describes the common economy of the farming unit, its mode of production, income disparities between farming units and the distribution of income within them. In part two the focus shifts to women, to their bargaining power and economic strategies. Women's strategies are investigated through detailed descriptions of some female work processes, the processing of edible plants and beer brewing.

In response to the first research question – How were the smallholder domestic economies organized and how did they function? – I conclude that they functioned as systems of separate but partially communicating economic spheres; the common sphere of the farming unit, managed by its male head, and the individual economies of its other

* E-mail: sigrun.h@telia.com

male and female members. The flows of resources between spheres were structured by gender and other intersecting power relations such as age, generation and marriage.

To answer the second research question – What were the mechanisms for economic inequality and social stratification? – I made detailed analyses of the common sphere's annual income and expenditure for seven farming units. I suggest that the agricultural economy should be understood as an annual spiral of incomes and expenses. What mattered to the farmers was not whether annual income matched annual expenses, but whether they were able at a given moment to cover a specific expense. When that was not the case, they had to sell food grains at an unfavourable price or indebt themselves. My review also reveals that male heads consumed significantly more of the common income than other members. Unlike the other members, male heads could pay personal expenses from the common fund, a practice which due to prevailing gender and age hierarchies was difficult to question.

The analysis of production and consumption budgets yielded basis for answering the third research question – To what extent did women benefit from cotton farming? – I show that the benefits women drew from the common economy were much more than the post-harvest transfers. The common economy, including income from cotton, would normally guarantee the basic food, health-related costs and housing. Unfortunately, less successful farming units could not offer this basic material security. In poor families, women had to mobilize additional work efforts and spent their personal money to compensate for insufficient means in the common economy. My conclusion is thus that the unequal distribution of income within the more prosperous families posed a lesser threat to the well-being of women than the absolute poverty in which some families lived.

To answer the fourth question – What economic strategies were available to women? – I have looked at how women managed time, money and relationships to meet obligations towards their domestic unit and to earn some personal money. I have explored the means through which women negotiated access to resources and argue for a broader understanding of "bargaining" than employed household economics, an understanding which includes hidden practices and silent modes of communication.

To answer the last question – How could female agency be conceptualized in relation to the domestic unit under male headship? – I have relied on anthropological definitions of agency, which suggest that agency can exist in different modes. I argue that women in West African smallholder families exercise agency both as individuals and as members of social collectives in which they are stake holders. Finally, I argue that women's everyday chores were more than just routine activities, that they should be understood as manifestations of agency because they were the modes through which women could realize own projects.