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# GENDERED LIVELIHOOD STRATEGIES IN RURAL SOUTH AFRICA AND APPALACHIA

By

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper examines the contextual nature of gendered livelihood strategies through a comparative study of rural women's producer groups in former homelands of South Africa and Appalachia. This comparative approach situates gendered livelihood strategies in distinct local contexts that are constituted by specific historical dynamics and cultural relations. Producer groups are defined here as cooperatives, networks, and other collective economic activities that generate income for households and are part of community-based economic strategies. The discussion focuses on the link between socio-economic conditions and gendered livelihood strategies and the economic viability of these producer groups as sustainable income-generating activities, especially in rural areas. The comparison of production and marketing strategies of a sewing group in South Africa and a knitting group in Appalachia reveals similarities, yet important differences that derive from their specific historical and cultural contexts. In sum, this research advances knowledge of gender and rural development by comparing the gendered nature of collective economic strategies in two peripheral regions of the so-called First and Third World.

## **Gendered Livelihood Strategies in Rural South Africa and Appalachia**

### *Introduction*

Gendered livelihood strategies are important aspects of economic development in peripheral areas. Women's exclusion from many formal economic activities, especially in rural areas, has contributed to their involvement in casual or unregulated labor as a means of coping with economic hardship (Agarwal, 1994; Momsen and Kinnaird, 1993; Tinker, 1990). Within this context of economic marginalization, some rural women engage in collective income-generating activities such as cooperatives and networks as part of household and community economic strategies (Rowbotham and Mitter, 1994; Townsend, 1995). These activities have the potential to empower women and other impoverished persons, especially in rural areas that lack sufficient employment opportunities.

This paper compares collective economic strategies of rural women in two peripheralised regions that have experienced distinctive social and economic transformation in recent decades. The comparative dimensions of this research focus on the similarities as well as the contextual differences among the selected regions of Appalachia and two former homelands of South Africa and several women's producer groups. Similarities among these peripheral regions include a dependence on primary sector activities, relatively high levels of rurality, gender-segregated employment, and the prevalence of informal economic strategies, especially among women. In contrast, these regions also have historically and culturally unique characteristics that have shaped the process of peripheralization: Appalachia industrialized relatively early and developed distinct relations of production in extractive industries based largely on class while the former homelands in South Africa are built on extreme racial oppression in an economy that was until recently relatively isolated in the global economy.

In light of these specific regional contexts, the paper will analyze and compare the viability of economic groups formed among rural women to produce and market locally made goods and

services. Specifically, the discussion will identify barriers to collective economic strategies and explore ways to improve their economic viability. Two producer groups in the former homeland of Bophuthatswana in the North West and rural Appalachia have been identified as examples of rural women's collective economic strategies.

### *Gender and Rural Development: Concepts and Issues*

Research in contemporary gender and development studies approaches development as a dynamic process which is produced in specific ways in particular contexts that are constituted by historically and culturally distinct forces. Numerous contributors to this rich and voluminous body of literature demonstrate that class, race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and age intersect differently in diverse historical and geographical contexts (Agarwal, 1994; Mohanty *et al*, 1991; Moser, 1993). Given this focus, feminist research is well positioned to explore the multiple aspects of gender identity and divisions of labor that are being reworked at different scales.

Much of women's exclusion from mainstream economic opportunities has led to their involvement in casual, informal, and unregulated labor at rates that exceed those of men (Benería and Feldman, 1992; Brydon and Chant, 1989; Lawson, 1995). This form of labor is part of a broader trend toward informalization of work that Portes and Benton (1989) and others have examined in the context of the globalization of capital. Very little research on the informal sector, however, compares these types of activities within advanced industrial and developing contexts. Comparative analyses illuminate important contextual aspects of livelihood strategies. For example, the gendered nature of collective economic strategies takes a variety of different forms depending on the particular material and socio-political contexts (Laurie, 1997; Wilson, 1991). There are commercial groups to generate income and welfare groups interested in improving the

quality of life of members' families and communities. In addition to formal groups, many women engage in a tradition of cooperation through informal support networks (Malombe, 1996).

Numerous studies in the gender and development literature have paid increased attention to the growth of small businesses and entrepreneurship among women in peripheral regions (Benería and Feldman, 1992; Wilson, 1991). Studies indicate that small and medium enterprises are growth areas in terms of employment and empowerment strategies. (Rowbotham and Mitter, 1994). Many of these enterprises, however, reproduce racial and gender inequalities in terms of access to credit and profitability. In the case of South Africa, for example, established white-owned micro-enterprises benefit from support agencies and financial services while emerging black-owned enterprises still work under repressive measures left over from the apartheid era (Rogerson, 1997). Some of the gender issues in these types of activities is the fact that women are often ghettoized in traditionally 'women's work' such as sewing and food production.

Economic organizations among women in peripheral regions give some background to this discussion of rural women's producer groups. Collective entrepreneurship among women in peripheral areas such as the former homelands of South Africa and Appalachia are essential to household survival strategies, yet largely understudied by practitioners and academics involved in rural development.

### *Gender, Race, and Inequality in Rural South Africa*

The gendered nature of rural development in South Africa is linked to cultural forces and limited economic opportunities that have contributed to the marginalization of rural women. Rural development also shapes and is shaped by the intersection of race, class, and gender

identities that are outlined in the discussion below. To fully understand the highly uneven distribution of land and income in this country, one must examine its history of colonialism and apartheid. Centuries of forced removals and relocation of Blacks have led to a situation where white-owned commercial farms control the vast majority of grazing and arable land (Wilson and Ramphela, 1989). In contrast, one half to one third of the total Black population of 30 million live in rural areas, much of which is uncultivable and nonarable (Levin and Weiner, 1997). South Africa's highly skewed income distribution translates into the top 5 percent of the population consuming more than the bottom 85 percent (Bond, 1996). Approximately two thirds of the African population live in deep poverty, the majority of these in the former homelands, or batustans, set up by the apartheid government as dumping grounds for Blacks.

High levels of poverty in rural areas are partly due to the labor system whereby males migrated to urban factories and mines. Gender relations and divisions of labor in the bantustans were greatly affected by this migrant labor system which left women to maintain households and oversee agricultural production in the rural areas (Beinart, 1994). Although patriarchal customs and legal structures curbed women's control over land and agricultural production, women became *de jure* heads of household in this highly gendered migrant labor system (Sharp and Speigel, 1990). The prevalence of female-headed households in rural areas necessarily affects household and community livelihood strategies. It is estimated that three quarters of household income in the former bantustans is from remittances and 10 - 15 percent is from informal activities such as crafting and street vending (Levin and Weiner, 1997). The latter activities are largely undertaken by women and children since remittances from migrant labor are not always reliable and are frequently controlled by the males (Sharp and Speigel, 1990). In addition to rural women's involvement in income generation, they have primary responsibility for domestic tasks

and agricultural production, burdens which place significant pressure on their time and physical well-being.

The economic restructuring in post-apartheid South Africa is linked to globalization and political relations that affect and are impacted by gendered livelihood strategies in rural areas. Consequently, informal sector activities have become increasingly important for households, especially in rural areas (Ahwireng-Obeng, 1993; Bob, 1997; Levin *et al*, 1997; Preston-Whyte and Nene, 1991). Although some attention has been given to small and medium micro-enterprises, there is relatively little emphasis in the South African gender and development literature on the gendered nature of these types of activities or the economic potential of women's groups, especially in rural areas. One exception is McIntosh's (1991) research on rural producer groups in the Transkei and KwaZulu that undertake production and exchange activities. He examines the impetus for such cooperative action, especially among women, and the ability to alleviate poverty and pursue rural development goals. Studies such as this demonstrate that rural women have greater chances for economic empowerment through collective organizations.

The peripheral area selected for research on women's collective economic activities in South Africa are the former homelands of Bophuthatswana located in the North West province (NW) (Figure 1). The North West Province encompasses most of the former homeland or "independent" state of Bophuthatswana and portions of three development regions from the apartheid era. The NW is the fourth largest of the nine provinces in area and its population is the fifth largest in the country. The province is one of the most rural in the country with 61% of its population living in rural areas (CSS, 1996). Gender plays a significant role in access to employment opportunities in the province as is evidenced by the fact that unemployment among women in the North West is 44% compared to 25% of men. Bophuthatswana was the site of

considerable relocation of Blacks during the apartheid era when people from diverse ethnic backgrounds were forcibly moved to remote and infertile resettlement areas. The economy in this province is dominated by mining, employing primarily males. These conditions have impacted the gendered livelihood strategies of households and communities and more specifically the access to raw materials and credit, labor processes, and marketing strategies of women's producer groups.

Given the economic and social marginalization of rural people, especially women, in this province, there is tremendous need for alternative economic strategies such as women's producer groups. Many of these activities, however, are limited by inadequate training, finance, and technological inputs. The selection of a specific producer group is based on the nature of the activities, the potential for creating community-based economic development, and collaboration with local researchers. In the North West, Operation Blanket is a non-profit group that oversees the sewing group that will serve as a case study for this research. The mission of this NGO is to promote sustainable growth and development for marginalized communities in rural areas (Kundu, 1996). The sewing group is one of the projects funded by Operation Blanket and has been operating for 5 years with approximately 15 members. It receives technical training and some financial support from Operation Blanket to purchase equipment and raw materials. Very little research has been done on this group although it has contributed significantly to the local economic base.

### *Gender and Development in Rural Appalachia*

This section compares the socio-economic conditions that have contributed to certain gendered livelihood strategies in former homelands of South Africa to Appalachia, a peripheral region which has experienced historically and culturally distinct patterns of gendered economic development. The analysis examines women's roles and economic status in the economic



development of Appalachia and introduces a case study of a women's producer group. The discussion specifically refers to West Virginia, one of the most rural states in the region and country (Figure 2).

Similar to rural South Africa, economic transformations in rural Appalachia are built on extraction of raw materials and geographic isolation. While the physical geography and national geopolitical context of these two areas differ considerably, the patterns of labor exploitation and rural isolation are common elements in their patterns of economic development. The physical geography of Appalachia has produced a region rich in natural resources which attracted outside capital on a large scale towards the end of the 19th century (Lewis 1993; Pudup 1990).

Gender relations and divisions of labor have been important factors in the economic development of this region. Productive and reproductive labor was clearly divided along gender lines (with some important exceptions) as men worked in the mines, mills, and factories and women were largely involved in household reproductive activities (Greene, 1990). Some women, however, contributed to their household incomes by taking in boarders, selling garden produce, or providing other services in the community such as laundry or child care. Other women were employed outside the home in textile and knitting mills, glassware shops, and tobacco factories (Hensley, 1990).

Contemporary economic restructuring in Appalachia has had a somewhat different impact on gendered economic activities than in South Africa (Oberhauser, 1993). In West Virginia, employment has increased in female-dominated sectors such as retail and trade, while it has declined in male-dominated sectors such as mining and manufacturing. In addition, the prevalence of female-headed households in Appalachia, as in South Africa, tends to increase the likelihood of poverty among women. Single mothers in West Virginia find it especially difficult to financially

support their households given their lower wages and fewer opportunities to generate substantial incomes. For some women, formal employment outside the home is not a feasible income-generating strategy for reasons which include lack of access to transportation, domestic responsibilities, inadequate job training or previous work experience, and other barriers to entering the workforce (Oberhauser, 1995).

Contemporary analyses of gender and income-generating activities tend to overlook the role of collective economic strategies in rural contexts. In a trend which is reflected in many industrialized and peripheral contexts, much of West Virginia's employment growth in recent years, especially among women, has taken place in small businesses and group enterprises (Oberhauser *et al*, 1996). A particularly innovative small manufacturing businesses operating in West Virginia is a network of producers called Appalachian By Design Inc. (ABD). This organization is a non-profit brokering firm that coordinates a network of mostly women in rural Appalachia who manufacture knitwear for sale to apparel design companies throughout the country. The network provides training and offers professional opportunities to approximately sixty skilled producers in West Virginia, Virginia, and Maryland (Appalachian By Design, 1994). Most of the women in this network live in rural areas of the region and are unable or choose not to work outside the home because of childcare, other domestic responsibilities, or the lack of adequate, well-paying jobs in their area. Additionally, many of the knitters live in low-income households that also operate family farms or have other sources of income. Production of the knitwear requires knitting machines that facilitate efficiency and adaptability to quick shifts in the design, quality, or style of goods produced. The organization is comprised of a complex social and spatial network of knitters who produce pieces in their homes and send them to a center to be seamed before they are shipped to the buyer.

## *Conclusion*

In sum, this comparison of women's producer groups in rural Appalachia and former homelands in South Africa provides a more in-depth understanding of the economic and social aspects of gendered income-generating activities and raises issues about the potential rural development from investment in the types of activities outlined here. Significant differences in the peripheralization of these regions, one in a region that developed along distinct racial and gender discrimination and repression and the other a peripheral region in an advanced industrial country that was grounded in raw material extraction and labor exploitation. Contemporary analyses of rural production systems largely overlook the role of women engaged in producer groups and their contribution to household and community incomes. Findings from this research demonstrate that women's roles in the household and regional economy should be carefully analyzed and incorporated into rural development efforts.

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Figure 1.  
Case Study Regions in South Africa

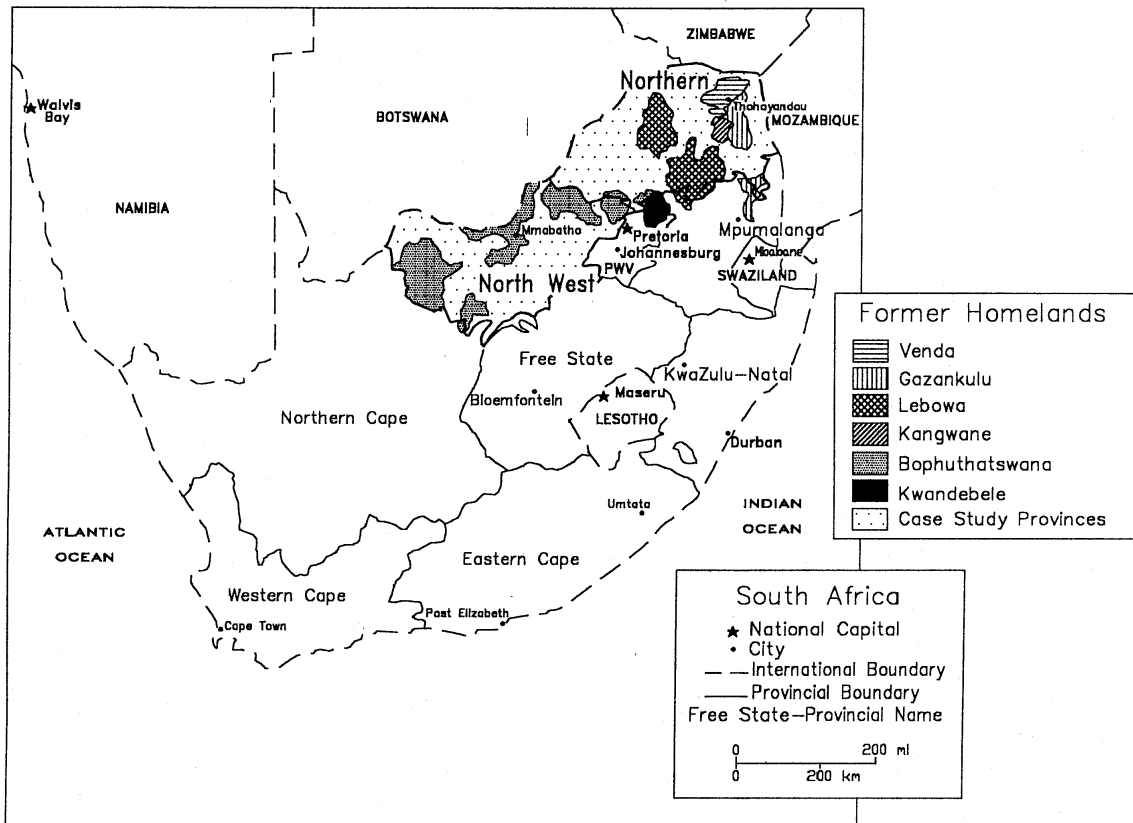


Figure 2. Selected Area for Research in Appalachia

