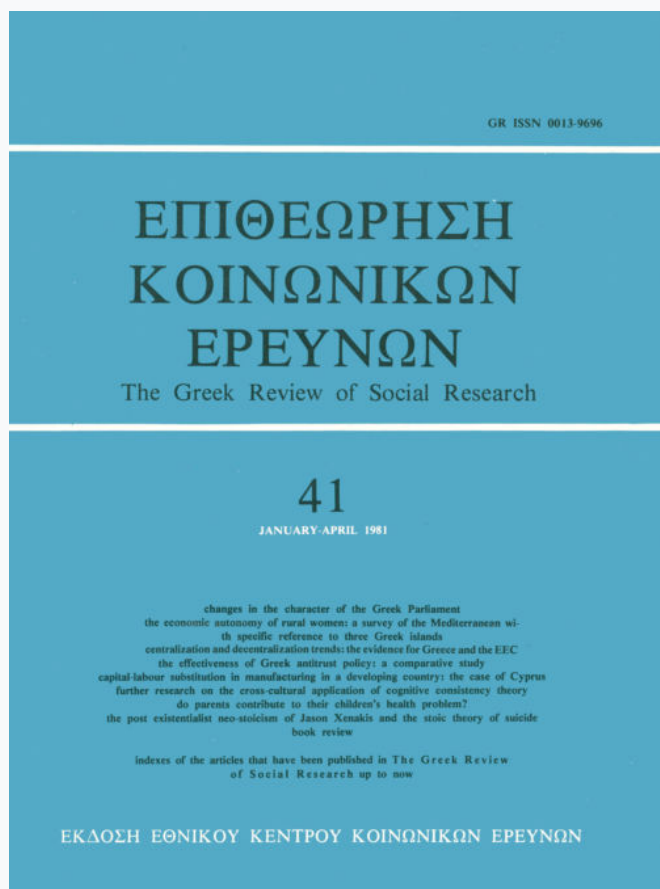


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### The economic autonomy of rural women: A survey of the Mediterranean with specific reference to three Greek islands

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# the economic autonomy of rural women

*A survey of the Mediterranean with specific  
reference to three Greek islands*

by  
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Although Mediterranean ethnography provides a wealth of information on sex roles and interrelationships, such information is often both contradictory and controversial. Not only is there considerable variation in definitions of male and female conduct but also, though any given community has clearly prescribed standards of propriety, we find many and significant divergencies from them. People do not have the same expectations from all men and women: the manner and tasks that they despise in some, they tolerate and even approve, in others. The literature abounds in statements that reveal the multiplicity of local attitudes towards women and their primary qualities. They are thought of as «sack(s) for carrying things (children)», «the centre, the soul of the home» or «the cause of quarrels and great feuds» (Hasluck 1954:25; Lison Tolosana 1966:307; Nelson 1974:554).

What appears as a simple set of observations involves, however, many variables and has meanings other than those immediately apparent. It is the intention of this survey to look at the relationship between ideal and actual patterns of female behaviour and the procedure in which women gain honour and autonomy in the rural Mediterranean. First, by presenting a number of important inconsistencies between social values and peasant wives' practices and second, by identifying the causes and effects of a lack of adherence to such values. We believe that neither the range of female activities nor their association with women's access to material opportunity, have been adequately accounted for in the literature. As we will try to demonstrate, freedom of economic choice is far more important in the definition of female roles than most ethnographers recognise.

It is argued that the autonomy and social esteem of rural wives are intimately connected and vary with the rights they hold within their families. As a result of the fact that material advancement is villagers' main objective, men and women are, above all, concerned with and valued for, their contribution to household sufficiency. More significantly, the nature of such contribution—and hence, the roles and prestige of marital partners—are not something fixed and absolute. They are adjusted to such aspects of social organisation as class membership, the ownership and control of property, the arrangement of marriages and systems of inheritance and residence. We do not deny here women's overall subservience to their male kin and the fact that they are liable to harsher restrictions than men. Our point is that although certain limitations are always applied to women's decision-making and movement, there are circumstances in which they enjoy undeniable independence within and outside their homes. These unusual and rather overlooked, circumstances, are the basic theme of the survey.

In speaking of the autonomy and power of Mediterranean peasant women, reference is made to their attainment of the right to direct major household

affairs. That is, the degree to which they enjoy some of the so-called male prerogatives together with—and this is important—the value these are accorded by society. Ethnographers frequently note that participation in public arenas leads to women's loss of honour and possibly also to their consideration as 'anomalies'. They further record that although male dominance is a universal fact, within their segregated worlds women use the resources available to them and manipulate male guardians to their own advantage. These findings are not disputed: the indirect means, however, by which women seek to mitigate a lack of formal authority, are irrelevant to our argument. The wives described do not gain the compliance of their menfolk through skilful persuasion. In contrast, they have many and acknowledged opportunities to act in their own right.<sup>1</sup>

The thesis draws a contrasting picture between ideal concepts of male and female behaviour and the tasks of marital partners as reflected in the organisation of peasant households. In this way, we hope to elucidate the extent to which social regulations concerning sex roles define or represent, the domestic division of labour, the part which husband and wife play in the management of family finances and the alliances they establish with other villagers. In short, an attempt is made to link the 'general' to the 'specific'. As it has been stated, the activities of peasant women are much less determined by what social norms demand than by the economic responsibilities they have for their families. If this argument is valid, then it is clear that an examination of the precepts of law or tradition does not in itself suffice to elucidate all aspects of women's experiences.<sup>2</sup> To give a fuller picture of their position, we examine both the differences and similarities between local or national definitions of female roles, and the daily accomplishments of rural women. This approach adds to the understanding of the situations in which wives abide by rules of modesty and the sources and consequences of nonconformity with them.

Elaboration is also made upon the procedure whereby women win social respect. Since not all of the wives who act in opposition to community values are censured, the occasion on which an engagement in other than purely feminine jobs is socially acceptable,

reveals the consistency between villagers' ideals and the expectations they actually have from women.

Main emphasis is placed on the family and conjugal roles. In part because of the significance of the family as the basic unit in the societies examined, and in part because public and domestic sectors of life are closely interdependent. In particular, we believe that women's activities in public areas mirror the extent to which they are accountable to men within the family. As a corollary of peasants' concern with material prosperity, its achievement comes to be a salient feature of the assignment of specific duties to each of the marital partners. This fact is most evident in the daily practices of peasant women: although in principle they should deal with childcare and house-keeping work alone, they show much initiative and may promote family welfare in a greater number of ways than do their menfolk.

It is important to add that the perspective in which the status of rural women is examined—that is, the assessment of the applicability of social norms in the light of concrete evidence—has not been systematically used by Mediterraneanists. Most of them have not been seriously concerned with comparative studies and cross-cultural analyses and give little, or no, information on the uniformity between asserted and 'real' patterns of family organisation and sex obligations or the links between village communities and the broader society. There is need for more comparison among the institutions, customs and practices of different societies and strata. Such a comparison helps to validate other works and highlights the degree to which the Mediterranean is a discrete entity.

This essay then, is not a case study nor does it expose the contradictions within a particular society. Through a review of the literature, a series of empirical surveys are discussed in order first, to reassess the evidence they supply in relation to our argument and second, to offer some suggestions as to alternative ways in which this evidence may be used.

### **material and methodology of the thesis**

The material presented derives from a number of sources. First, from anthropological surveys carried out in the Mediterranean though where certain issues have been inadequately discussed, reference is made to propositions put forth by ethnographers from other parts of the world. Second, from the Greek Civil Code and the legal interpretation of its articles. Third, we have consulted Greek folklore studies and reports of local traditions, as the collection of customary practices by Zepos and von Maurer (1931, 1834). These last data have not been accumulated in order to serve as a basis for anthropological analysis. They nonetheless, give interesting details about regional variations which we compare and evaluate. It is essential to add here that a basic feature of the available literature on the Mediterranean is the relative neglect of secondary sources. In spite of the wealth of accessible and

1. We prefer the terms autonomy and power to equality, for the latter entails that marital partners have the same tasks and privileges. Women, however, may attain domestic rights without engaging in the same activities as men: what is important, is that they control material resources. Our use of the terms autonomy and power resembles the meaning certain writers give to authority and *de jure* power: It denotes that women have major responsibilities and assert them in public domains as men usually do (Rosaldo 1974b; Lamphere 1974).

2. The distortion of concepts about women is notable in reports in journals. In Spare Rib for inst., we read that 'because Greek women are so totally housebound they are in the dominant position when it comes to imparting attitudes to their children, but in every other respect... (they) are absolutely subservient to their husbands' (1978:16). Such remarks however, should not be taken uncritically: there are many and significant variations in women's behaviour and rights.

relevant documents—like records of marital or financial agreements, literary studies and linguistic analyses—these have rarely been consulted and their interrelationship is discussed at no length. An account of inter-disciplinary inquiries, however, is crucial: it not only shows the topics and methods that earlier scholars have dealt with but further, points to the link between contemporary and precedent institutions, the issues that remain undiscussed and supplies data which may no longer be possible to obtain.

Library research is not of course, without its limitations. There are in effect, some reservations to be entered with respect to the documentation of the hypothesis suggested here. The first concerns the sources of our material: if these prove unreliable, the conclusions arrived at may be open to criticism, too. Second, though a great number of issues have been examined in the Mediterranean, several themes have not been explored or only partially so, and in different contexts. Consequently, less cross-cultural comparison has been made than desirable and at times, not fully comparable data had to be used.

The thesis is in two parts, further subdivided in six chapters. In part one, the focus of attention is on the broader field of ethnographic evidence on the position and duties of peasant women. The purpose of this analysis is threefold. First, to give an outline of concepts of propriety and the sexual division of labour; second, to highlight the major divergencies between the designation of certain jobs as male or female and the economic responsibilities that peasant couples actually hold; third, to elaborate upon the main factors leading to the achievement by women of autonomy and social prestige.

## 1. review of the literature on Mediterranean women

In order to deal with the problem of validity of the existing data and the unsatisfactory evidence on female activities, several accounts of conjugal associations are reviewed, and mention is made of the areas regarded most problematic. It is shown that in spite of the greater sophistication and wider range of interests that characterises contemporary approaches, our knowledge of female roles is incomplete and possibly also misleading. Because anthropologists have been primarily concerned with male tasks and occupations, they have failed to document certain aspects of rural women's status and the diversity of their rights and duties. A more complete appreciation of female practices should include the elucidation of three main areas. The first pertains to the applicability of honour ideals: as a consequence of their preoccupation with local ideologies, Mediterraneanists do not always identify the extent to which women act according to them, the process whereby they acquire a good social name, the similarities between such processes and the determinants of male esteem, or the connection between class position and female reputation. It is possible to

say, that ethnographers' concern with the context—rather than the applicability—of codes of honour and the ways in which men—and not both men and women—make use of a good name in society, are two of the best examples of the «male» bias in the literature.

The emphasis ethnographers place on community ideals further explains the inadequacy of details they give about the economic decisions and rights of peasant wives—and this is the second area that requires more empirical study. Indeed, the part women take in production, the domestic management and the establishment of formal relationships with other households, together with the link between their economic services and domestic position, are either overlooked or discussed in terms of the limited value men attach to female work. The preoccupation, however, of rural people with their material welfare generates enough pressure to alter the occupations of spouses and allows for the assumption by wives of many «male» jobs and privileges. Finally, emphasis is placed on the paucity of information on law and the correlation between national and local concepts of sex interrelations. Although in most Mediterranean societies there are civil codes, their provisions and workability as sanctions on people's behaviour or the situations in which women take advantage of what law entitles them to, are virtually ignored. We need to know more about the procedure whereby traditional values are replaced by modern codifications, whether or not national norms allow women more privileges than local customs, the way in which judicial proceedings reinforce different obligations on husband and wife. The contrast between legal and community precepts provides the framework in which informal and daily life operates.

## 2. the values of honour and shame

The code of honour is elaborated upon in connection with the control that each of the spouses has over property and his or her social prestige. It is argued that women do not accumulate honour by the preservation of chastity and reserve alone: female honour contains a material component clearly manifest in the ways in which people evaluate women's practices. To illustrate this view, an attempt is made to isolate the factors leading to women's adherence to precepts of honour. The data suggest that these factors are primarily economic: people's beliefs about female modesty together with the extent to which women are disciplined by males, follows women's and not men's, economic authority. Whatever a family's place in the social hierarchy, when women participate in realms of major economic action and administer the household economy or dispose of other critical resources, they attain considerable freedom of movement. They are not treated as symbols of male dominance and do not or less so, have to display an undisputable reserve in manner.

### *2.1. The assessment of honour in relatively unstratified societies*

The association between women's honour and economic power is especially evident in relatively unstratified communities in which people cannot differentiate themselves from others in terms of material prosperity alone, and try to do so by stressing their moral integrity. Honour becomes a «currency in which people compete for reputation» (Pitt Rivers, 1968:504), and the struggle for the attainment of honour results in a reliance on kin for advice and assistance (Banfield, 1965; Campbell, 1965; Hutson, 1971). Eventually, there is established a reciprocal relationship between the «family» and each of its members. This fact couples with the difficulty men have in advancing their material affluence to define the emphasis they place on their wives' moral virtue. As Schneider puts it, when a household's patrimonies are vulnerable, the «repository» of family honour is its women who come to be treated as «part of the patrimony» (1971:18). This view is supported by the findings of many ethnographic surveys. In rural Greece, girls are one of the «critical resources» that enable men to join the village elite through a successful arrangement of marriages (Gavrielides, 1976:272). In situations in which men control the means of production females are thought of as wicked or «born bad» (Durham, 1971:184; Blum, 1970:17) and have no honour: they only have shame which is «coterminous with their sexual vulnerability» (Black Michaud, 1975:218). Ritualised forms of female nature are a symbolic expression of men's efforts to affirm their sufficiency and manliness through a complete dominance over their womenfolk and are most prominent when women have no access to economic action.

### *2.2. Honour and the class system*

In spite of the absence of well-authenticated surveys of families from upper echelons, the available references show that wealthy women are usually less honoured than men of the same class position. This fact is, again, inseparably linked to women's deprivation of vital economic responsibilities and their consequential dependence on male kin for social and economic support. As a general rule, the daughters of landlords and rich merchants do not dispose of their marital settlement but transfer title to property from fathers to husbands and sons. The situation is different among lower ranking households: poor working wives are at the bottom of the hierarchy of honour, yet, the recognition of their active contribution to the domestic well-being, tends to counteract the scorn with which they are looked upon by the larger society and insures the respect of their relatives and community fellows. It is, moreover, possible that behaviour which is in principle condemned will be excused if undertaken as a means by which women serve the interests of their families. In a Portuguese village, wives who accept a wealthy lover to add to domestic finances, are not

blamed: their adultery is justified in terms of their economic contribution to the household (Cutileiro, 1971:146).

Variations in female prestige are much less consistent with differences in women's class position than differences in their property rights. When their economic accomplishments are both crucial and acknowledged, women are relatively free from the sanctions normally applied to female conduct for, more often than not, men attach greater significance to the part their spouses take in family sustenance than to their sexual modesty.

## **3. women's economic activities**

The procedure whereby an increase in women's economic decision-making is translated to autonomy within the family, is discussed in relation to the roles of women who belong to communities with different economies. This helps to the understanding of the conditions adding to the co-operation of spouses in the administration of financial and domestic affairs. Less attention is paid to wives' maternal and purely housekeeping tasks, for even when they are highly prized in them, they do not gain social and economic independence. The argument runs as follows: in spite of the allocation of all major responsibilities to men, rural women do engage in a great number of extra-domestic activities and even come to earn their families' living through their own labour services and yield. Yet, neither the volume nor the significance of their work guarantees the amelioration of these women's position: unless they conduct matters essential to household viability, they remain answerable to their husbands.

These issues have not been exemplified in detail by Mediterraneanists: although they recognise that female work is important, they often speak of the existence of a rigid division of labour as unproblematic. In communities, however, in which the nuclear family is the main productive unit and people derive their livelihood from their immediate economic environment, sex roles and obligations are mutually interdependent. The designation of certain jobs as female does not prevent women from doing additional work or proving more indispensable than their spouses in the daily running of households. Such practices are consistent with the diversity of female roles: a woman's engagement in male jobs may readily be justified as an extension of domestic labour, while a man taking over his wife's duties will be accused of a loss of masculinity.

### *3.1. Women's participation in agricultural production and trade*

The connection between women's freedom of economic choice and their achievement of certain autonomy, is easily discernible from anthropological, or other, studies of the division of labour in the Mediterranean. In Mani, northern Albania and

Romania, village wives did all the agricultural labour as a result of their menfolk's migration or seclusion during tribal warfare (Kalonaros, 1934:58; Whitaker, 1976:200; Cernea, 1978:108). In spite, however, of their indispensability as cultivators of family plots and providers of basic essentials, these women did not enjoy egalitarian relations with their spouses. Only in the Romanian villages wives gained a degree of independence: since after the collectivisation of farms, agricultural yield was computed on an individual basis, female work was «distinct and visible», and women were not seen as men's «anonymous auxiliaries» (Cernea, 1978:119).

Another example, which also adds to the view that the nature of women's economic responsibilities is more critical than the volume of their work in the definition of their status, concerns women's trading activities. In the rural Mediterranean, major transactions are dealt with by males. Women rarely trade and when they do, it is mostly artifacts or dairy products (Hoffman, 1976:331; Brandes, 1975:51; Halpern, 1967:145) and in situations in which they have to replace their husbands (Fogg, 1941:106; Hart, 1954:80; Pitt Rivers, 1971:58). The prohibitions concerning female commercial activities are partly explained by villagers' belief that wealth accumulated by women spells dishonour, for it challenges men's efficiency as family providers. Peasant women, however, engage actively in trade and their earnings are necessary to their families' maintenance. In African and Asian societies, wives cannot claim support from their spouses and earn their living by selling crops (Boserup, 1970:92). Furthermore, more women participate in commerce in communities in which there is diversified farming: because the growing of cash crops requires a lot of attention throughout the year, they are in charge of their preparation and sale (Cohen, 1965:24; Bialor, 1976:231), initiate numerous exchanges with other village women (Allen, 1976:181), decide about the quantity and price of crops and make agreements with both local and non-local patrons (Riegelhaupt, 1967:120).

### 3.2. *Private and public aspects of women's economic roles*

Although in none of the instances discussed in this section, women exercise power equal to their husbands', in some, economic rights are more evenly distributed between spouses. The data clearly show that women's freedom of action increases together with their autonomy in the conjugal partnership. The private and public aspects of life are not independent from one another: the conditions responsible for the attainment by women of domestic authority lead to the recognition of their labour contribution by the family members and the larger society. Women who own basic material resources and retain title to them, do take decisions about their families' wider interests and are not altogether subservient to men. The reverse is not, nonetheless, true: an engagement of husband

and wife in the same extra-domestic work—such as the cultivation of land or the employment in industry—does not necessarily entail a change in the division of rights and decision-making within the home.

## 4. *female status in Greek law and custom*

The importance of women's economic rights in the definition of their associations with men, is understood better through an analysis of the relationship between the provisions that Greek law and custom make for the sexes. The findings from relevant studies indicate that traditional beliefs have often proved more effective than national codifications in determining men's and women's daily practices. Even judicial decisions have made concessions to people's ideals (Loizos, 1978:187; Safilios Rothschild, 1969:215).<sup>3</sup>

The discussion of the legal regulations which govern family life and sex roles helps first, to demonstrate that the legal rights of Greek women resemble those they are accorded by tradition and that even when law provides equally for both sexes, women may not take advantage of their entitlements. This is a corollary of the strength of customary sanctions and the associated emphasis placed on males. It is also influenced by the nature of the *Greek Civil Code*: a considerable number of the allowances it makes for women, are subject to the consent of their male kin. Unlike men who utilise their legal rights by virtue of their authority as heads of households, women are not always able to do so, for they are accountable to fathers or husbands.

The second conclusion which can be drawn from the comparison of legal with traditional values, is that in both legal and customary principle, concepts of sex interrelationships correspond to the economic status of the couple involved. Women enjoy their legal entitlements only when they possess the means to retain and implement them. Unless they attain a degree of economic and domestic autonomy, they tend not to defend their interests by appealing to court: in an attempt to ensure the support and protection of their kinsmen, they confer deference to them and forfeit part or most, of what Law entitles them to.

### 4.1. *Variations between the Greek Civil Code and custom*

#### a. *Marriage*

The degree to which national and local definitions of female behaviour may differ from or coincide with each other, is seen through the comparison of the rights and duties that females are given by law, to the activities of peasant women as these emanate from the literature. In this way, it becomes evident that the main assumption underlying legal and customary concepts of female roles, is that women are not eco-

3. In this chapter (4) we focus on unwritten traditions. Discussion of local codes is made in chapter 6, which looks at the rules governing inheritance in two islands of the Aegean.

nomically active and need male support. Girls are endowed because they are «incapable» of making their living, and unmarried or divorced women, can claim part of their fathers' pension.

#### b. The spouses' mutual obligations

The view that variations between legal and customary concepts of female conduct follow differences in women's economic responsibilities, is validated by many ethnographic descriptions of Greek family life. High social status, a rich dowry payment or a respectable profession make it possible for women to attain a great deal of independence. Although legal statements demand that women obey their husbands, such requirements are not evenly applied to all females. The behaviour of particular wives as well as the way in which their appeal to court is dealt with by jurists, are adjusted to the obligations these women have towards their families: a rich woman may buy expensive items irrespective of her spouse's approval, while the purchase of luxurious clothes by a poor wife implies a disregard of the domestic well-being and may be forbidden by her husband (Roiilos, 1946:D, 77-8). Further, in spite of the fact that in law, men should not resort to violence as a means of imposing their will, what is considered «ill use» of male rights depends on the class position of the couple in question. What is unacceptable for members of the upper echelons—such as beating or insulting one's wife—is much less important among those who belong to lower strata (Campbell, 1964:152; Du Boulay, 1974:104). Again, and this is true among all the strata, women who actively share in household organisation enjoy privileged associations with their spouses (Friedl, 1967:105; Dubisch, 1976:322; Gavrielides, 1976).

#### c. Divorce

Although the grounds for the legal separation of marriage are in law, the same for both sexes (articles 1439-1446), the chances which husband and wife have for obtaining divorce are unequal. A woman attains divorce only when her husband has been involved in serious misdemeanour. In contrast, a man may achieve legal redress with the «slightest indication» of his wife's engagement in illicit affairs (Roiilos, 1946:Z, 79).

There is, however, a clarification to be entered here: women's lack of modesty results in the breakup of marital unions mostly when the part they take in family maintenance and the administration of household affairs is insignificant—or regarded as such. In this sense, the limited number of divorces in rural Greece is closely linked to the fact that spheres of major economic action are normally reserved for males: women have to tolerate a mistreatment by their spouses in order to secure life essentials. Safilios Rothschild's findings from an analysis of honour crimes in contemporary Greece, document this hypothesis. She reports that townswomen who have a paid job and keep the household budget, utilise their

legal entitlements—and sue for divorce—more frequently than those of their village counterparts who are not in charge of family finances (1969:210-2). Again, ethnographers who have conducted surveys in other parts of the country, observe that the greater the similarities in the quality and value of sex roles, the less the restrictions placed on women's behaviour. The possession of large dowry properties for example, has often compensated for brides' bad reputation or lack of sexual purity (Friedl, 1962:69; Pollis, 1931:243).

The examples cited clearly show that the circumstances in which customary sanctions prove more effective than national codifications in the definition of sex interrelations, reflect the spouses' economic rights and activities. There is a notable similarity between the behaviour of women who are exclusively confined to domestic work and what the Greek Civil Code states in connection with female submission: in much the same way that executors of law decide favourably about rich and socially distinguished wives, men tend not to discipline their spouses when they mutually exchange opinions and economic assistance. To the extent that material autonomy is a prerequisite of legal and social status, women must hold the same economic rights as men in order to make use of their legal entitlements.

#### 5. the «reversal» of women's domestic position

The analysis of the content and applicability of honour ideals, the designation of certain jobs as male or female, and the association between legal and customary definitions of female behaviour, has shown that although women often enjoy high respect in their roles as mothers and housekeepers, they are, on the whole, accorded less power and prestige than men. Male dominance is not, however, a universal fact of domestic and social life: there are several societies in which women make use of critical economic rights within and outside their homes and are publicly acknowledged as equal or even superior to their husbands. In fact, such is their social esteem and eminence, that men and children are known and addressed to by female names.

It is essential to clarify that the situation described in the following pages, is not one in which women acquire autonomy by virtue of a strong personality or a use of informal techniques. Their favourable position is determined by the rights and duties they are assigned by their families and local institutions. The argument is that rural communities are not divided in domestic and public spheres alone. There is also, an interstitial space of great significance, pertaining to the wider and external interests of households—main transactions, negotiations with outsiders—which are generally vested in male hands. An active and regular participation of women in these realms of family organisation, is a major source of domestic autonomy. The co-operation of spouses in family decision-making is far more conducive to the establishment of certain equality between



them than women's entry into spheres which are not directly related to household concerns, like community politics.

The theoretical framework for the discussion of the circumstances in which women enjoy some of the «exclusively male prerogatives», is provided through the presentation of a number of well-authenticated descriptions of women who play a key role within their families of procreation and act as heads of households in the presence of their husbands. This material helps us to understand that in an attempt to promote their material affluence, rural people may consciously ignore their principles and make provisions which are diametrically opposed to them. Furthermore, the cases examined substantiate the view that female activities have to be studied with respect to the socioeconomic context of households, rather than in terms of social prescriptions of female conduct. In the societies discussed, the increase in women's economic autonomy is always accompanied by a more or less, unrestricted mode of life. The discussion of women who exercised much the same domestic power as their male kin do, also reveals the extent to which institutions and practices from neighbouring communities may differ one from the other, and the impact which the incorporation of village economies into that of the broader nation, has on local life.

The acquisition by women of rights and privileges ordinarily allocated to men, is referred to as the «reversal» of female position. This term is not meant to denote that spouses mutually exchange jobs; it is wives alone who assume male duties and responsibilities. What is important here is that the autonomy of the women concerned is such, that challenges familiar notions of female subjugation. Although women do not neglect their motherly and domestic tasks, the «reversed» part of their activities, is diametrically opposed to what essays on female conduct usually describe. Women play a critical and acknowledged role in male realms of the household economy, direct matters that are equally or more, significant than those settled by men, dispose of a good deal of the food supply and handle their spouses' income. Their independence is manifest at the community level, too. Their presence in public domains is not an exceptional event; they negotiate with traders, purchase crops in central markets, and attend to municipal affairs.

In speaking of the causes of female autonomy, specific importance is attached to economic and demographic factors. The former concern the ways in which rural people make their living and the part each of the sexes takes in production. The demographic factors pertain to the migratory movements of the adult male population and their impact on female activities: as a corollary of the physical separation from their husbands, women come to secure the family well-being through their labour and play a number of managerial roles otherwise performed by the absentees. The main point then, is that the «reversal» of female position is

not a result of a single cause, but derives from a combined configuration of several factors, prominent among which are the economic and demographic characteristics in the societies presented.

### 5.1. *Ethnographic evidence on the reversal of female position*

To illustrate the issues raised above, a series of cases in which women arrange matters of paramount significance to the household viability and assert their rights in a socially acceptable way, are brought in and analysed, in order to isolate the conditions that are conducive to these women's dominance. It is regrettable that the available data are not conclusive; in addition to the fact that little discussion has been made of women who formally engage in «male» and prestigious work, the material we have furnishes few only details about the range of female choice. Moreover, some writers attribute high female status to older systems of matriarchy, and fail to account for its correlation with women's economic rights and obligations. In effect, the causes of female power and the stages of its development are not fully documented.

In spite of such limitations, the discussion does raise several interesting issues. First of all, it becomes clear, that the degree to which women submit to their menfolk varies with their economic rights. Women who marry men of a lower socioeconomic standing, are likely to exercise ultimate authority within their houses; a fact that is illustrated well with Peters' survey of affinity in a Maronite village. He writes that women whose husbands come from other villages and bring in little at marriage, are invariably dominant in the conjugal partnership (1976:47). The insecurity of men's economic position, together with the ownership by women of the bulk of family resources, reinforce the latter's domestic status and reflects on their social prestige, too. Women in the Maronite village are known by their maiden names and some, give them to their children (*ibid.*, 49).

The data give evidence of an intimate connection between female roles and the economy of the larger community. In all of the instances examined, the growth of industry and/or demographic changes, affect both the domestic and extradomestic activities of peasant women. Certainly, they do not take over all kinds of male job but act in realms immediately related to their families: only the wives of Galician fishermen have a say in community affairs and represent the village in a project of land reform (Rey Henningsen, 1978:28). It does seem, however, that if women win full freedom of choice within their homes they will also hold freedom of movement and action in the larger society. In Soajo, because of men's migration, women undertake a wide variety of tasks formerly carried out by males and retain part of their authority even after their husbands return home: they continue to handle the household budget and give men only pocket



money (Callier, 1966:255, 262). Similarly, in a Druze village, migrants' wives act without consulting those of their male kin who stay with them, establish relations with local men and men from nearby villages, and/or dispose of land and rentable wealth (Sweet, 1967).

Further, Rosenfeld's findings from an examination of the effects of industrialisation on family life in an Arab community, show that innovative female roles conflict with ideals about female modesty. Women are no longer «kept in the courtyard» and girls start going to school (1968:744); practices that are defined by the growth in women's economic power.

It is worth stressing that the instances cited, support the argument that the amelioration in female position, together with its social acceptance, are consistent with the fact that women satisfy their families' economic interests in a formal and active way. Last, but not least, these instances suggest that in addition to control over material resources, the conditions favouring women's autonomy are a lack of male supervision, and the psychological assistance they receive from kinswomen.

### *5.2. Male absenteeism*

Although it is only scant information that we have on the lives of those members of migrants' families who stay behind, the sources show that there is a close association between a couple's physical separation and the increase in women's domestic autonomy. Since separated wives cannot rely on their husbands for maintenance and emotional help, they replace them in the settlement of various extra-domestic jobs: they work at shops, develop financial relationships with outsiders, see to the upkeep of family plots, direct the construction of houses. What is more, such women are not judged with respect to the non-conventional features of their behaviour but mostly, in terms of the attendance to the needs of their families.

Not all women of course, whose husbands migrate, hold the same degree of independence: a fact that again, points to the multiplicity of the determinants of female position and roles. In Soajo, the absentees' wives display undeniable initiative, while Arab women's decision-making is not always direct. These variations in female rights are explained by the dissimilarities in local residence patterns and the duties of the separated women. In particular, Soajo wives remain in their parental locale after marriage and are not superintended by their affines. They actively see to problems concerning the cultivation of land, and are in command of the sale of crops. In contrast, women in the Arab village, move into their husbands' natal home and do not have a say in subsistence arrangements. Unless then, peasant wives reside nearby related females and conduct basic household affairs, male absenteeism is not conducive to an improvement of female status.

### *5.3. Residence within the bride's locale*

A physical proximity of mothers, daughters and sisters, does not only imply that they exchange mutual

advice and company: they also have many domestic interests in common, assist each other in the execution of daily labour and serve as channels of financial aid in times of hardship. It is easy to imagine that networks of females are especially solidary in communities in which there is irregularity in male employment and women own basic family resources, i.e., land and houses. Through the alliances they develop, they undermine much of their dependence on males. Though somewhat extreme, the description of in-married grooms who scrubbed floors and churned the butter in Galicia, reveals some of the limitations placed on such men's behaviour by their mothers-in-law (Lison Tolosana, 1976:308).

The domestic authority of separated wives is further influenced by the nature of their decision-making. An assumption of male tasks does not in itself suffice to strengthen their position. It is necessary that they direct their enterprises and that the jobs they take over are not incompatible with motherly and housekeeping work. The «reversed» part of their conduct is then, confirmed and justified in public opinion. In Tret, a village on the Italian Alps, women's participation in household administration is altogether legitimate, for it is a corollary of local regulations governing inheritance. Because land is given to children of both sexes, some women come to take shares so large as those of their brothers and their claim to the patrimony enables them to share in discussions about the disposal of land and take managerial decisions (Cole 1974:199). The link between women's economic rights and their autonomy has been emphasised by many Mediterraneanists: they are in agreement that women who control domestic property or other kinds of wealth, enjoy a privileged association with their husbands (Baxevanis, 1972:40; Gavrielides, 1976:272; Lineton, 1971:282).

## **6. three Greek cases of female autonomy**

The interdependence of people's aim for material prosperity and the allocation of rights and duties to rural women, is manifested by the range of female choice and action as revealed in family life on Kalymnos, Samos and Karpathos. We have suggested that there is considerable variation in the degree to which women take advantage of economic opportunities and the effects of their activities on the nature of their domestic power. The social and economic eminence of the women in the Aegean islands, is conditional on the fact that they contribute to household welfare in more significant ways than their spouses do and conduct a great number of family matters irrespective of the latter's opinion. As was the case in the instances described earlier, these women's accomplishments are not seen as a usurpation of male authority: rather, it is these very accomplishments that define and manifest female autonomy in the three Aegean islands.

The conditions leading to the exaltation of female position have been already exemplified: these are

men's absence from home, the establishment of networks consisting of 'female kin, and women's active participation in major economic arrangements. In the island communities, these factors combine in a way that has not yet been recorded in other parts of the Mediterranean to define women's privileges. These communities are not of course, dominated by females: men are always present and there are spheres of action in which women do not enter—like community politics. In spite of the fact, however, that the three islands are part of the broader nation, they exhibit a number of unique characteristics in relation to female status. The comparative analysis of these case studies aims, therefore, at the identification of the main determinants of female dominance.

The data presented in this section are drawn from ethnographic, legal and folklore sources and are especially helpful in understanding the causes of the variations in women's conduct, for they cover both the period in which the institutions and practices we are concerned with persisted in the islands, and the contemporary situation in which they are in decay or have vanished. On the other hand, certain topics have not been taken up or only inadequately so: women's role in agricultural production has been overlooked, and the explanations offered as to the origins of local customs are often contradictory and do not illustrate the link between these customs and the economy of the islands. In spite of such difficulties, however, this survey does add to our knowledge of the position and activities of peasant women: not only because the instances introduced differ from the majority of accounts of female practices, but also because Greek island societies have been much less investigated than those on the mainland.

#### 6.1. Kalymnos

Kalymnos is famous for its natural sponges as well as for the independence of sponge divers' wives. These women dominate in their families for half the year, that is, the period during which their husbands travel at sea. Unlike other Greek women, they have a «great deal of power in the direction of human affairs (and) ... a larger measure of authority» (Bernard, 1968:49). This difference in the status between «fishwives» and those on the mainland, is caused by three factors. First, by the fact that divers' wives live without male surveillance for 6-8 months every year and second, by their post-marital settlement in houses built close to their parental homes (Bernard 1976a:296). The formation of female neighbourhoods together with male absenteeism, strengthen the co-operation among kinswomen. They are invaluable to one another in overcoming difficulties that result from men's absence and replace the latter in the provision of daily help and advice. They make all kinds of purchase on credit and register the children at school — tasks which are in principle, assigned to men (Bernard, 1976c:306).

The third cause of the acquisition by women of basic economic responsibilities, couples with the recent

decay in the sponge industry and alter radically their behaviour. The «fishwives» organised a campaign and succeeded to have half of their husbands' salary paid to the bank under their names: such a display of power would not have occurred when the sponge fishing was the mainstay of the island economy. The degree to which divers' wives hold an advantageous position is discernible from the attitude they have towards the situation they live in: they have expressed relief at being able to act without male interference. They are, moreover, envied by women from non-seafaring families whose husbands are not absentees and hence, have to obey and submit to them.

#### 6.2. Samos

On Samos, women exercise great domestic power as a result of the physical separation from their husbands. The most salient manifestation of their eminence is the practice of a system of female nomenclature: the majority of the islanders are addressed to by the name of their mothers or wives (Zapheiriou, 1946:121). This extensive use of matronymics is a principal element of community life and reflects women's key role in the economic organisation of village families.

The possession by women of high authority and the prevalence of a female naming system, have been long established on the island. Because men spent all working days of the week on their land holdings, it was women and children who mostly lived in villages (*ibid.*, 134). As was the case on Kalymnos, separated wives took a major part in household management and made agreements with brokers about agricultural produce or the price of wine. The participation of women in such sectors of the domestic economy eventually granted them several privileges: they sat at the table even when there were male visitors, they celebrated their namedays, and neither within nor outside their homes were they called by their spouses' name (Limberis, 1975:260, 265). Such instances are not simply ethnographic descriptions of island customs. To the extent that a couple's domestic roles are mirrored by their interactions in public areas, a lack of ritualised forms of female deference—like those we find in most monographs on other parts of Greece (Campbell, 1964:151; Sanders, 1962:130; Du Boulay, 1974; Bialor, 1968)—gives evidence of wives' familial autonomy. In other words, the use of matronymics, the celebration of female namedays etc., are consistent with the importance of island women's economic activities and rights.

The exercise by women of great domestic power is encouraged by the fact that after marriage, they stay in their natal neighbourhood (Stamatiades, 1891:273) or far from both their own and their spouses' parents (Kritikides, 1875:30). This type of residence insures young brides the company of their female kin or, on the occasion they move in a new area, allows them to live with no immediate control by affines.

Zapheiriou states that as a consequence of changes in the local economy, men and children are no longer known by female names (*ibid.*, 135). These changes concern the introduction of technological facilities which help the islanders to move easily to the farms and spend less hours outside their homes. The connection between the abandonment of female names and the loss by women of their domestic authority, is obvious: since men stay in the villages for longer periods of time, they take on the headship of households and their wives have less freedom of action than they do when they live alone. Although the data do not specify whether or not island women are in charge of major domestic affairs after the reunion with their spouses, it is likely that they do not dispose of agricultural yield or establish relations with brokers when men are in the village. If this argument is sound, then the adoption by children of paternal surnames, reveals the fact that women are not the dominant partner in the marital relationship.

### 6.3. *Karpathos*

The information on the island of Karpathos illustrates yet another way in which female autonomy is linked to economic factors: island wives attained power and prestige by virtue of their title to family possessions. In particular, the rules governing the transmission of property, demanded that the eldest son and daughter receive, respectively, all the wealth which their father and mother brought in at marriage.<sup>4</sup> Their siblings were altogether excluded from inheritance or took a share in the goods accumulated during their parents' marital life (Michailides-Nouaros, 1926:7-8; Dawkins, 1902-3:197; Manolakakis, 1896:123).

The privileged heirs were called *Kanakaris* (the son) and *Kanakarā* (the daughter). As it happens elsewhere in Greece, a *Kanakara's* endowment was not subject to alienation when her husband was in debt, and if a marriage came to an end, she received it intact. Unlike other Greek women, however, the daughter-heiress retained full title to her marital settlement. She controlled both the movable and immovable parts of it, and could sign and execute contracts in her own right. The range of her decisions was not limited to household concerns and she was able to buy or redeem land irrespective of her spouse's will. Eventually, there was a «preponderance of the female ownership of land» (Dawkins, 1902-3:198).

The *kanakarā's* high status was preserved by the practice of intermarriage among the *kanakaries* groups (Konsolas, 1963-4:227). The members of these groups constituted the local elite and possessed a number of exclusive prerogatives. A *kanakarā* had a private seat in church (*ibid.*, 227), could go out unattended (*ibid.*, 235), and her luxurious wedding ceremony was one of the outstanding events in the community (Georgiou, 1958:174).

4. The custom has been found in other parts of the Aegean, too (Kenna 1971:237), but has most rigidly persisted in Karpathos.

Although the authors are in agreement about the eminence of the daughter-heiress, they have taken it rather uncritically, and little is written on its daily manifestations. Michailides-Nouaros states that she disposes of her wealth «in such an independent way that even women form the most...liberated countries would envy» (1926:117), but does not elaborate on this «independent way». What is recorded, is that she handled her immovable property without consulting her husband (*ibid.*, 31), and that she used the interest of such property for her own benefit (*ibid.*, 117-8). The *Kanakarā's* economic rights are also reflected by the little care men bestowed upon the cultivation of their wives' plots (*ibid.*, 118-9), and the exceptional occasions on which they sought employment in nearby communities (Philippides, 1973:50). These practices are in line with men's inability to exploit female dowries and a lack of manpower with which they would work on their own fields. It may thus be assumed with reasonable certainty, that a *kanakarā* did not relinquish her titles to her husband. Although she might not make frequent use of them in order to avoid placing her dowry wealth at risk, yet, she controlled it and took a number of crucial decisions about its management.

The *Kanakarā's* economic autonomy affected her social name in two ways. The first is connected with the fact that the *kanakaris* took his share in the patrimony only after his father's death and brought in little at marriage (Haniotes, 1963:53). In effect, he spent the greater part of his marital life without administering family—i.e., female—wealth. The second way in which a *kanakarā's* title to property influenced her prestige, concerns the use she made of her maiden name after she got married (Michailides-Nouaros, 1934:144). She was known by her father's or mother's family name, signed formal documents with it, and also gave it to her children.

From the rules of succession, marriage and reference on Karpathos, there emerges an emphasis placed on the preservation of paternal and maternal goods; a man's fields were secured by their transmission to his eldest son and the alienation of a woman's land was prevented by the control which the first-born daughter had over this property. The wealth then, that a *kanakarā* took at the expense of her sisters, together with the title she retained to it, are the salient features of her social and economic eminence.

### conclusions

As it has been stated in the introductory section, the aim of the thesis was to contrast data on social norms and peasant practices in order to stress the value of comparative analysis in understanding sex roles and the conditions responsible for their definition. The survey was based on diverse sources including anthropological, legal and folklore material, which were presented in a way that shows the activities of rural

couples and their effects on family life and reputation.

It has been argued that the interaction of honour ideals, national codifications and customary concepts of conjugal interrelations, provides a good framework for the study of the procedure whereby wives acquire specific rights and duties. Indeed, even a brief survey such as this one has been, does highlight some of the similarities and variations, continuities and changes in male and female experiences. Moreover, it points to the weaknesses of current anthropological thought and writings, and prepares the grounds for further investigation. Certainly, comparative research has some limitations, the most important of them being the inadequacy of the available information of the sexes' economic associations, their mutual exchange of services, and the degree to which women make use of the rights they are given by law.

We suggested that the range of rural women's choice and action has not been fully exemplified, partly because of ethnographers' failure to recognise the multiple means by which these women contribute to family sustenance and organisation, and partly because access to economic opportunity is far more pervasive in the definition of female status than usually recognised. Our primary concern was to point out the interdependence of women's autonomy and their control over material resources. Though the connection between the two is not simple and direct, they are both determined by factors intrinsic in the household economy and the impact such factors have on female behaviour. To isolate the determinants of a growth of female economic power, attention was focused on women's daily activities which were contrasted to standards of modesty as dictated by social norms and convention. In communities in which spouses are the basic productive team and wives work harder than their husbands, one might expect to find a symmetry in the conjugal division of rights, especially because brides are normally endowed at marriage and grooms take their shares in later years. Yet, neither the ownership of wealth nor the fact that they overcome most of the daily exigencies, guarantees women independence. The data clearly show that unless they control property, they remain answerable to men. The correlation between the management by women of wealth and their domestic position, is most evident in times of crises or when their husbands work far from home: though women then, take over a great number of male jobs, they are not treated as «equals» unless they also play administrative roles.

The analysis of national and local values of marital obligations, further suggests that women from well-to-do families, and those who handle domestic finances, enjoy privileged associations with their husbands. There is, however, no inevitable link between class position and female autonomy: in spite of the acknowledgment of their legal entitlements in court, rich wives tend to have limited freedom of choice, for final decisions are taken mostly by their male kin. In contrast, many low class women are in charge of

family affairs, as a result of their intimate collaboration with men in the accumulation and management of the household income.

The social recognition of women's behaviour is the second salient feature of the procedure whereby they gain autonomy. There is a complex association between social ideals, economic roles and their evaluation by society. The way in which rural women are judged acquires specific significance when they carry out tasks which are opposed to those they are assigned. In these circumstances, social respect indicates, first, that women act legitimately and second, the kinds of deviancy rural people may tolerate. In spite of their preoccupation with adherence to rules of modesty, villagers do not always condemn a lack of compliance with them: instead, many concessions are made to women who diverge from social expectations in order to earn the family bread or because of their high social standing. In this sense, the acceptance of women's right to act freely is more important than the fact they hold this right: it underlies the value peasants attach to material prosperity and points to the factors allowing women to act in an otherwise reprehensible manner.

The significance of economic factors as an element in the definition of female prestige, is notable in people's concern with the «innate» qualities of women—an issue which recurs in the literature but has not been systematically tested. Notions of female predisposition to misbehaviour prevail in societies or sectors of society, in which women rely entirely on their kin for support: men then, confirm their masculinity through a display of discipline of related females. Conversely, beliefs in female inferiority and the control of women as a source of male pride, are rarely found when both sexes are economically active: women are valued in much the same way as men, that is, in terms of their economic accomplishments.

The discussion of the rights and activities of Mediterranean peasant wives, raises issues which challenge several ethnographic assertions concerning female position in rural societies. First, a suggestion put forth by the contributors to *Woman, Culture, and Society*, namely, that there is no «society in which women have publicly recognised power and authority surpassing that of men» (Rosaldo, 1974a:3). The authors claim that sexual inequality emanates from the opposition of public and private spheres and the association of women with the home, an «inferior» sector of society. They state that women gain power only when they transcend domestic limits and create a world of their own, or take over male work (*ibid.*, 36). Although these views have been supported by several ethnographers (Denich, 1977:217; Psaltis, 1967:131), there are some qualifications to be made in relation to their overall validity. First of all, not all women are submissive: however relative or incomplete, the «reversal» of their position in the villages of Galicia, Soajo, and the Aegean islands, shows that their economic authority may well «surpass» that of males

and that women may dominate in the conjugal partnership and give their names to members of households. Second, the authors place undue emphasis on the institutionalisation of male roles. Though the domestic sector is always reserved for women, the public one is not an exclusively male realm of action: on Karpathos and Galicia, the systems of inheritance and residence were more favourable to women than to men.<sup>5</sup> On Kalymnos and Samos, the absence of islanders affected drastically the allocation of domestic rights and the legitimisation of women's involvement in economic activities. The assertion that only men hold formal and prestigious positions is therefore, a projection of the neglect of the variability in local institutions and practices.

A third point is that women's entry into authoritative domains does not in itself imply that they become men's equals. It is one thing to say that couples take on the same extra-domestic job—like industry or finance (Sacks, 1974:222; Rosaldo, 1974b:35)—or that reliance on peers gives women financial aid, and another that they attain status equal to their husbands'. Female autonomy emanates from a combination of social and economic factors at the domestic level. Since spouses' social interactions are defined according to the roles they play in the home, in order to enjoy privileged relationships with men, wives need to share in family decision-making as they do in spheres of subsistence. It is worth adding that many feminists omit to take into account whether women's earning of high wages or pursuing of life-long careers, is translated to domestic autonomy (Benston, 1972:126; Blake, 1974; Dahlstrom, 1967), that is, they do not clarify that if women do not control their income, they are unlikely to benefit from their entry in esteemed professions. There is need for fuller integration of the study of sex interrelations to the analysis of family life and the social evaluation of female activities.

Finally, and this applies primarily to societies in which the nuclear family is the basic productive unit, the domestic sector is not sharply demarcated, from or structurally 'inferior' to public ones. There is also an intermediate realm of action relating to a family's management and its external interests and links. It has been our intention to show that women's active participation in these realms of domestic life has tremendous effects on their status and power. The sources cited invariably indicate that women who establish alliances with villagers, direct tasks advancing the family's welfare and decide together with men about

household matters, are not answerable to them. It is also clear that such women may take little or no, part in wider spheres of economic action: very few were employed in wage labour, and only those in Galicia dealt with affairs pertaining to the municipality. Again, a *Kanakarā* would scarcely 'transcend' domestic limits: she was not committed to work in fields or other, non-domestic services. Further, the women described, did not abandon childcare duties. To paraphrase Rosaldo, these duties are not necessarily connected with fewer power than those of men (1974a:3). The assignment of critical responsibilities to the Mediterranean women, was reconcilable with and not alternative to, feminine roles and hence, women were neither restricted nor disgraced. The management of family matters is thus, more conducive to a growth of female authority and esteem than the participation in domains which are not directly related to family life.

It is essential to note, that although reference has been made to the Aegean women in order to evaluate feminists' propositions about the determinants of female power, it should not be assumed that these are 'emancipated' in the contemporary meaning of the term. As it has been repetitively stressed, their autonomy was limited to family administration and was an outcome of the rights granted by local institutions: it was not the result of a struggle for liberation, as feminists might put it. The study of these women's experiences, highlights the extent to which theories concerning the causes of female autonomy apply to rural communities and helps to find alternative ways in which peasant wives may attain independence.

In exemplifying female roles in the Mediterranean, we have attempted to demonstrate, that there are few standards of behaviour to which women invariably conform. We have claimed that in spite of a relative continuity in beliefs and regulations governing female action, the obligations of specific women are not always comparable. Furthermore, although their position is consistent with access to economic opportunity, other factors are of decisive importance, too, and these factors combine in complex and unpredictable ways. Exceptions do not, of course, imply a denial of dominant patterns: they nonetheless, indicate that both the autonomy and the social esteem of women are liable to fluctuation. In turn, it is not only difficult to make generally applicable statements about female conduct but also, to say what is 'deviance'. As a corollary of the diversity in women's practices and the contradiction between the elements defining them, we should not speak of female status at all. It is more appropriate to say, that the range of female choice and action is so flexible as social and economic structures in any given society, and so are women's authority and prestige.

5. The way in which people divided their property contradicts Goody's assumption that European 'diverging devolution' is in stark contrast with African systems of inheritance according to which wealth descends from males to males and from females to females (1976:10, 89).

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