



Exploitation, patriarchy and petty commodity production: class, gender and neocolonialism in rural eastern Uganda

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ABSTRACT

Processes of gendered exploitation within villages are integral to world-historical capitalism. Analysing them informs pathways to change. This article illustrates three forms of ‘everyday exploitation’: ‘direct’ exploitation of labour by petty capital, ‘indirect’ *exploitation through petty commodity production*, and the ‘*triple exploitation*’ of labouring class women through the interplay of capitalism and patriarchy. This is done through detailed data on class, gender and generational *relations* within agriculture and brickmaking in an Ugandan village facing a ‘neo-colonial absence’ of public services. Increasing out-migration, meanwhile, underlines a growing crisis of simple reproduction amid pauperising petty commodity production and scarce wage-labour.

KEYWORDS

Exploitation; patriarchy; labour relations; petty commodity production; classes of labour; differentiation; neo-colonialism; Uganda

Introduction: petty commodity producers, classes of labour and exploitation

Capitalist exploitation and possibilities for pro-labouring class change are shaped by both ‘larger-scale’ and more ‘everyday’ social relations, although the relative prominence of each varies in different locations.¹ In trying to better understand processes of exploitation and class formation in the rural global South – with a view to challenging and overcoming the appropriations and oppression of global capitalism – researchers have emphasised the role of transnational capital, ‘landgrabbing’, neo-colonial international institutions, ruling class governments, and other powerful large-scale capitalist agencies that are exploitative and/or appropriate public revenue, land and other resources (for example, Mbilinyi 1990; McMichael 2012; Carmody 2016). Fewer studies have focused on exploitation within villages, or on forms of wage-labour and petty commodity

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production, although this literature is nevertheless considerable in relation to Africa and elsewhere (for example, Cliffe 1977; Bernstein 1979; Ngonzola-Ntalaja 2002; Lindell 2010; Greco 2015; Mueller 2015; Oya 2015; Oya and Pontara 2015a; Petit and Rizzo 2015; Pérez-Niño 2016; O’Laughlin 2017; Cousins, Dubb, and Hornby 2018; Illien, Pérez Niño, and Bieri 2022; Engels 2023; on Uganda, see, for example, Mamdani 1987; Martiniello 2019; Greco 2020).

Without seeking to privilege them as an object of enquiry, this article aims to show how ‘everyday’ social relations within villages impact on classes of labour’s material and political conditions. Studying them matters for understanding concrete forms of patriarchal, ecocidal capitalism, its methods of immiseration, and possible routes to overcoming them. To this end, the article outlines dynamics of differentiation and exploitation within a particular Ugandan village facing a ‘neo-colonial’ absence of public services. It focuses on iniquitous class, gender and generational relations within the village’s agriculture and brickmaking, which are understood as being embedded in broader regional, national and world-historical relations. Three concrete forms of exploitation are discussed: ‘direct’ exploitation of labour by petty capital, ‘indirect’ exploitation through petty commodity production, and the ‘triple exploitation’ of working-class women. Before discussing these in detail, key categories are defined and the methodology is outlined.

Petty commodity production (PCP) refers to forms of small-scale household production that involves ownership of some means of production and self-employment (Bernstein 1986). It can be both agricultural and non-agricultural. Small-scale farming is the world’s most common form of petty commodity production. Many farmers are also involved in subsistence production, in which case the produce is consumed at home and never reaches the market as commodities. While there are still areas where farmers are relatively isolated from capitalist markets (e.g. Li 2013), there are now relatively few farmers who are pure subsistence producers. The vast majority are also (or solely) involved in production for the market, which makes them petty commodity producers (PCPs). And because a clear majority of the world’s farming households cultivate less than a hectare of land, most of the world’s farmers are petty commodity producers.

Some PCPs accumulate, and those that do so consistently are emerging petty capitalists with investible surpluses and an increasing use of hired labour. Most PCPs, though, do not accumulate. Most, in fact, cannot make a living from a single form of petty commodity production – unsurprising in the case of agriculture given the small size of most landholdings. Most petty commodity producers, then, combine one or more types of PCP with wage-labour, usually of a precarious and informal nature. These PCPs are part of classes of labour (Bernstein 2006, 455; Lerche 2010, 65; Pattenden 2016, 23) the majority of the world’s population that do not accumulate share a position as members of exploited classes, and get by through PCP and/or wage-labour.

Petty commodity production is not a temporary category. Although some petty commodity producers are in the process of becoming small-scale capitalists and others pure wage-labourers, PCPs as a general category are a permanent and durable section of the world’s population, surviving through ‘self-exploitation’ and being exploited by others. The peasantry will never disappear, and so understanding ‘exploitation through petty commodity production’ will always matter, as will the gender-based differentiations of both PCP and wage-labour. These reflect the co-constitution of class and gender relations and, more broadly, the co-constitution of capitalism and patriarchy (Federici 2004).

Direct exploitation, exploitation through petty commodity production and triple exploitation

Capitalist exploitation takes many different concrete forms (see Watts 1992; Banaji 2010; also Baglioni et al. 2022 for a broad conceptualisation of exploitation). It is more obvious and direct in capitalist-owned workplaces where surplus value is extracted from the surplus labour time that labourers work over and above the time it takes them to produce the value of their wages. There are also less direct or disguised forms such as sharecropping arrangements that tie labourers to pieces of land for a season and provide wages in kind rather than in cash (e.g. Pattenden and Wastuti 2023).

There is exploitation by PCPs: some better-off petty commodity producers – both petty capitalist PCPs and those in the process of becoming petty capitalist PCPs – exploit wage-labourers. But it is argued here that there is no exploitation by the poorer majority of PCPs who do not accumulate and belong to classes of labour. There is not, in other words, exploitation *among* classes of labour. Labouring class PCPs do sometimes hire wage-labourers and so, in a ‘classic’ sense, can be seen as exploiting others, but when seen as part of the broader capitalist relations in which they are enmeshed, labouring class petty commodity producers are themselves exploited through what is termed here as ‘*exploitation through petty commodity production*’. This more indirect form of exploitation involves labouring class PCPs yielding their surplus labour to capital.

This surplus labour time comes from the time over and above when petty commodity producers are working for their own survival, and are instead producing sources of surplus value that capital extracts through several related mechanisms. These are rooted in the fact that the ‘income’ the petty commodity producer receives for her produce is lower than the value it generates, just as wages are lower than the value labour-power generates. In the production of essential commodities, or ‘wage goods’ – like the maize, beans and bricks discussed in this article – the prices paid to petty commodity producers are pushed down to allow: i) capital in general to hold wages down by keeping the price of wage goods down, allowing them to compete in the marketplace and accumulate; ii) traders and others along the downstream commodity chain to appropriate a share of the petty commodity producer’s labour time in the form of profit. This is not yet a conflict over the distribution of surplus-value in the sphere of exchange, but more a conflict between direct producers and (petty) capitalist traders over the amount of surplus labour time and the scale of potential profits.

The bulk of petty commodity producers, like the wage-labourer, receive what they need to survive, or less than that, while others appropriate their surplus labour and accumulate through it. But appropriating surplus labour time by suppressing petty commodity producers’ income is not the only mechanism of exploitation through petty commodity production: in most cases a single form of PCP does not provide the basis for simple reproduction, and so petty commodity producers are compelled to do additional forms of PCP and/or wage-labour. And when, as in this article’s fieldwork village, the rains are less plentiful and the volume of grain sold to merchants drops, then more labour-power, nurtured by female reproductive labour, is dispatched beyond the village as migrant labour for capital to exploit and accumulate through.

During these secondary and tertiary economic activities, the petty commodity producer yields additional surplus labour time: as surplus labour time itself in the labour process if the secondary activity is wage-labour, or, if she does additional forms of PCP, then the

overall labour time available to capital is increased through the production of time-saving commodities like street food, which help to keep those that buy it working for longer by reducing their reproductive labour time (e.g. Wolf 1990; Pattenden 2023 on Indonesia). All the while the PCP-labourer's own working day is lengthened, and this is before reproductive labour time is taken into account (see below).

Exploitation through petty commodity production does not only entail exploitation of petty commodity producers. Some non-accumulating PCPs, especially those with fewer working-age family members, hire labourers, sometimes for particularly low wages. Rather than exploitation by non-accumulating labouring class PCPs, these labourers, like the PCPs they work for, can be seen as exploited by capital more broadly. This becomes even more clear-cut where households mix wage-labour and petty commodity production (see below).

It has been argued that exploitation through petty commodity production contributes to capitalist accumulation in four ways: i) the suppression of incomes that labouring class PCPs receive for their produce; ii) the extraction of surplus-value through additional forms of wage-labour carried out to meet the requirements of simple reproduction; iii) additional forms of PCP that cheapen the costs of social reproduction and extend total social labour time; and iv) the exploitation of wage-labourers employed by labouring class PCPs.

A fifth element could be added: upstream input producers like agricultural fertiliser manufacturers and loggers supplying brickmakers. The relation between fertiliser producers and small farmers is complicated by differences in yield, and there are further complications in relation to the use of wage-labour and natural resources in the production of the inputs themselves. But when timber is sold to brickmakers before being combined with labour-power in the production process, this can be seen as an advance appropriation of surplus labour time, which is realised as profits for the logger (and rents for the officials who gatekeep access to the timber) through the imminent exploitation of labouring class PCPs and wage-labourers in the brick production process.

Exploitation through petty commodity production also incorporates the world-historical dynamics of colonialism and neo-colonialism, which shape the conditions and relations of social reproduction over time. These dynamics include the colonial exploitation of forced labour and coercive control of commodity chains (which, for example, held down the prices paid to Ugandan cotton farmers [Mamdani 1984]), the appropriation of natural resources such as land (Martiniello 2019), and the neo-colonial insistence on neoliberal policies that push for the use of national and international government revenue – itself ultimately primarily based on surplus value extracted as public revenue through mechanisms such as taxation – to subsidise private-sector service provisioning rather than free public services. The impacts of this on forms of exploitation and poverty levels in this article's fieldwork village are particularly stark, as will be shown.

As well as increasing the costs of healthcare and education, neoliberal capitalism erodes public support for petty commodity producers in the form of subsidies for fertilisers, or investments in soil quality or drainage (for example, Bategeka, Kiiza, and Kasirye 2013; Asiimwe 2018). It also reduces public investments that increase access to non-agricultural employment. The consequent hit on PCPs' material conditions, and the relative lack of alternative sources of income, weakens their socio-political position, and makes it harder for them to influence the workings of local government institutions – a 'democratic deficit' that makes it far easier for local officials and representatives to appropriate significant

shares of those public resources through the political economy of corruption (for example, Asiimwe 2018). All of these related dynamics contribute in their turn to concrete forms of exploitation like those at play in this article's fieldwork village: they diminish material conditions, increase dependence on wage-labour, erode bargaining power, and leave classes of labour exposed to more oppressive forms of exploitation.

The third form of exploitation analysed in this article is the 'triple exploitation' of working-class women – both PCPs and labourers. 'Triple exploitation' denotes the patriarchally intensified forms of exploitation of women in wage-labour, petty commodity production and reproductive labour. Women work harder across the spheres of production and reproduction for lower wages and lower incomes from PCP. And they work longer hours than men, primarily due to the highly unequal distribution of reproductive labour. Reproductive labour is where labouring bodies are birthed, nurtured, cared for and dispatched to the sphere of production as labour-power. Along with natural resources, it is the underlying basis of all capitalist profit. Patriarchal ideology, in most cases propagated or supported by states (for example, Robinson 2009), undervalues reproductive labour, which legitimises women's shouldering of unfair burdens of care work, intensifies women's reproductive labour, and helps to justify their lower wages and PCP incomes (Federici 2004; Kalb 2004). Women's agricultural wages in this article's fieldwork village, for example, were usually lower when they worked with their husbands than when they worked alone (see below). The gendering of 'more' and 'less' direct forms of exploitation in terms of income, and the duration and intensity of work, is part of patriarchal capitalism's triple exploitation of working-class women that cheapens, intensifies and extends wage-labour for particular capitals and capital in general.

Methods

Fieldwork was only conducted in one village with higher than average poverty levels, relatively few petty capitalists, and a relatively large proportion of subsistence agricultural production. And so readers should note that the arguments made in this article are shaped by a particular social setting – albeit one with broader resonance. Fieldwork focused on the social relations of exploitation within a particular village and some of their links to broader world-historical dynamics. It moved from survey work to interviews and back to surveys during four months in late 2020 and 2021. Surveys focused on who did what, while interviews focused on relations between and within households, and sought out links between the village and broader economy. The initial survey of 100 households focused on occupations, land holdings, land rented in and out, livestock owned, access to services, and distributions of family labour versus buying and selling of labour power. It had three key shortcomings – common in first rounds of fieldwork and why multiple rounds are important. It missed some migrant labourers, especially those migrating for shorter-term casual employment. It was quite inaccurate in terms of landholdings, especially for smaller landowners. And it failed to sufficiently distinguish between forms of brickmaking.

The interview phase subsequently sought information on divisions of labour and forms of wage-labour, petty commodity production and small-scale accumulation. It triangulated for migration, and for landholding data by asking how long it took to hand-plough

land. Thirty-four interviews were conducted on the basis of stratified sampling in different parts of the village and different extended families (understood as three generations living in close proximity). Interviews were with the lead female or male of the household, and sometimes both together. More women were interviewed as they were more likely to be at home. Eleven re-interviews were conducted where there was uncertainty or gaps in the data. The final phase involved key informant discussions (some of which were reprised in 2023) and sweeps across different parts of the village in order to cross-check data and pick out missing details. Over 70,000 words of notes were generated.

The data were collected during the Covid-19 pandemic. The author conducted all of the surveys and interviews. He was physically present for two-thirds of the interviews, but the remaining third was carried out with the author in Kampala and the main co-researcher – a female village resident – on the phone to him while sitting in respondents' homes and translating the author's questions and responses to them. A second male co-researcher from Mbale town conducted a minority of the interviews with the author to triangulate for issues of positionality.

The fieldwork village

Levels of inequality have risen across Uganda since the mid 1990s (Nuwagaba 2017, 31, 33; Asimwe 2018, 155; Wiegratz, Martiniello, and Greco, 2018b; Wilson 2018, 132). Eastern Uganda's 2016/17 poverty levels were the same as those of 1990 in relative terms (Development Initiatives 2021); much higher in absolute terms. This region, with poverty levels close to double the national average (World Bank 2016), is where the fieldwork village of Budumi is located, around 12 kilometres from Mbale town.

Budumi's poverty rates are *at least* 75%;² 77% of its population belong to classes of labour. A generation or so ago the people of Budumi ceased to primarily make a living from agriculture and increasingly mined their soil and cut trees to make bricks. Brickmaking is largely commercialised, provides higher incomes than agriculture, and is mostly a dry season activity primarily done by men. Agriculture is mostly a wet season activity primarily done by women. Less profitable than brickmaking, agriculture is primarily subsistence-oriented although significant shares of maize and beans are traded beyond the village and between households. The circulation of bricks, maize and beans is a central aspect of exploitation through petty commodity production in Budumi, and the fact that brickmaking is predominantly male and agriculture predominantly female is a feature of the village's patriarchal capitalism.

While 6% of households are petty capitalist, 82% are involved in wage-labour and over 90% in petty commodity production.³ The village's 100 households own 60 acres of farmland and rent in a little over 30 acres from neighbouring villages (see **Table 1**). Agricultural yields are relatively low and erratic (Goldman and Heldenbrand 2002 on the fieldwork area; also FAO 2021). Agriculture is entirely unmechanised: planting, weeding and harvesting are all done exclusively by hand, and most ploughing and levelling is too. Only a minority can afford to hire one of three pairs of oxen. Post-harvest maize-threshing, and the beating and winnowing of beans, are also unmechanised. The eight- to nine-month agricultural cycle of two beans and one maize crop intercropped on one acre requires around 1000 hours of work,⁴ or 225 half labour days with a median

Table 1. Distribution of land ownership (and amount rented) in acres.

Amount of land (acres)	Number of households	Number of acres
3–4	4	
Around 2	3	
Around 1.5	3	
Around 1	15	
Around 0.5	33	
Around 0.25 and below	43	
Total amount of land owned		60
Total land rented out		4
Total land rented in		33
% households renting in land		40
Average area rented in		0.83
Total area cultivated		89

wage of US\$2000 (around US\$0.60; and a peak wage of US\$1.50 for a 50% longer shift). Nevertheless, agriculture, including on rented land, only absorbs around 23% of the village's total labour-power.⁵

The average landholding is 0.6 acres, and over three-quarters of households own half an acre of land or less (see **Table 1**). Landholding sizes will decline further over the next generation because male children comfortably outnumber households and residence is largely patrilocal after marriage – a key aspect of patriarchy, along with the largely patrilineal inheritance of land. At the same time socio-economic differentiation is accelerating as the small petty capitalist minority increase their landholdings. This means that more direct forms of exploitation of labour by capital are becoming more common, although exploitation through petty commodity production remains more widespread.

Agriculture alone was sufficient for accumulation in only one household – one of only four with three or more acres of land (see **Table 1**). A further handful of households make a living from agriculture (two have oxen that they rent out for ploughing), and around 20% meet their core food requirements from their land. But for most it provides under a fifth of food needs. Although over 95% of households remain involved in agriculture, it is a secondary activity for over 80% of farmers. Beyond agriculture and brickmaking there is a smattering of other low-income forms of PCP – two people run bars selling *marua* (maize and millet beer), a couple of vegetable traders, a handful of permanent and a few part-time street-food makers/vendors, two hairdressers, and one or two firewood collectors and second-hand clothes traders.

Although most households still primarily depend on petty commodity production and wage-labour *within* the village, over the next decade the population will cease to primarily live from its territory. Common property has all but disappeared. There is little free timber to collect for burning bricks or building the homes of the newly married. The number of cows is dwindling with the amount of grazing land. Firewood takes women longer to collect. From November to February there is hardly any agricultural labour, and while brick-making makes up for the shortfall for some, a significant minority reduce their number of meals (see also Asiimwe 2018, 156). Access to non-agricultural labour in and around the village is limited. The late 2010s completion of a China-financed industrial park in nearby

Mbale town primarily benefits villages that lie closer to it, near the Kampala road – nobody from the fieldwork village works there.

Budumi's combination of pauperising forms of petty commodity production and scarce wage-labour reflect a broader crisis of simple reproduction under capitalism (Bernstein 2006). Outmigration is increasing, particularly distress migration by solo male migrants in search of casual wage-labour. In late 2021, 23 married and unmarried men from Budumi's 100 households had migrated for want of work, a far greater number than those from better-off households who migrate as part of a strategy of upward mobility (the latter mostly do more regular skilled construction work or factory work; one is a construction manager, while three permanently migrated families have accessed white-collar work). Most distress migrants aim for Kampala's construction sites where wages are at least 50% higher than at home. A handful work as security guards. The only two female distress migrants were live-in domestic workers in Kampala and Gulu, earning wages that are less than a fifth of those of unskilled construction workers (US\$18.50 a month, or US\$0.60 per day). The few cases of migration to nearby Mbale had better outcomes for village households, as stronger links to the village increased the sharing of higher incomes.

Budumi's material conditions are made considerably worse by the absence of free public education and public healthcare in what is a malaria-endemic region, as well as an almost total absence of support for small-scale farming – all absences that relate to colonialism, neo-colonialism, and neoliberalism (see below). As noted above, the lack of free public services lengthens petty commodity producers' and labourers' working hours and increases oppressive forms of exploitation.

Brickmaking and agriculture are also the mainstays in the other four villages in Budumi's parish. Accumulation levels are similar in three of these, but the fourth has twice as many petty capitalists and a handful of larger landowners. Two of the parish's three brick traders live there and there is a private clinic, a private school and a roadside café. There are 20 concrete houses as opposed to just two in Budumi. Another village, closer to a river, has better soils, and a fourth, further from the road, has seen higher levels of outmigration. It should be underlined that Budumi cannot be seen as representative of rural Uganda as a whole. It lies in its poorest Eastern region, on the 'wrong' side of the regional town of Mbale. On the other side, towards Kampala, access to non-agricultural employment is a little greater and petty capitalist farmers more numerous, at least in those villages that are closer to the main highway.⁶ But Budumi is not untypical either – there are similarities with other villages further south near the Kenya road, and in more remote villages to the west and north of Mbale. Western Uganda as a whole is better off, as are areas around Kampala, but parts of Uganda's Northern region have similar levels of poverty to the Eastern region (Development Initiatives 2021).

Petty capital and classes of labour

No household owns as much as much five acres, but small variations in the size of landholdings belie considerable socio-economic and socio-political differences, and obscure complex, often exploitative and gendered, everyday relations. Those with half an acre or less are net sellers of labour-power, and most owners of a single acre work with family *and* some hired labour, while owners of more than two acres primarily buy in labour-power. A fifth of Budumi's households are net buyers of labour-power, although less than half of these primarily buy labour-power (see **Table 2**).

Table 2. Class position: accumulation, petty commodity production and wage-labour.

Household type	% of HH	Bases of simple and expanded reproduction	No. of HH	Main characteristics of economic activities
Accumulating households	15	Petty capital Net buyers of labour power who are slowly accumulating	6	Faster accumulation, mostly buy labour-power ^a Agricultural PCP based on net buying of labour power alongside regular/formal employment (including teaching)
Non-accumulating net buyers of labour-power	8		4	Agricultural PCP based on net buying of labour power alongside non-agricultural PCP Farming by ex-formal employees/larger landowners mostly with bought labour-power (+ remittances)
Classes of labour	77	Mostly family labour PCP + higher/more regular wage-labour outside village PCP Mostly PCP Even mix of PCP and wage-labour Mostly wage-labour	4 2 4 9 16 6 3 37	Agricultural PCP mostly with family labour + bought labour-power ^b Net hire in farming/non-agri PCP + higher/regular wage (above poverty line) (net hirers out overall) Farming/non-agricultural PCP + regular urban employment Mix of farming and non-agricultural PCP (without renting labour in or out in net terms) Agricultural and non-agricultural + some wage-labour Mostly brick PCP and mostly wage-labour in agriculture Mostly brickmaking wage-labour and mostly PCP in agriculture Agricultural and non-agricultural and some PCP
Older widow(er)s who depend on children economically but live separately and manage homes with help from grandchildren (N=8)				
Total	100			

Notes: ^aMost petty capitalists mostly used hired labour, but it is impossible to be sure in all cases due to the fragmented nature of landholdings and the changing amounts of family labour; ^bSome might include this subcategory among classes of labour. PCP = petty commodity production/petty commodity producer.

While socio-economic differentiation in Budumi is nothing new – a petty civil servant and a bank official had expanded their landholdings some decades ago – in the last few years a drop in poorer households' landholdings has been accompanied by a slow piece-meal concentration of landholdings, mostly due to pockets of trade-related accumulation. One of a handful of petty capitalists expanding their landholdings had started logging and trading timber, partially on the back of renting out his oxen. He had acquired at least five small pieces of land. Another had become a brick trader and acquired an acre. The village's two shopkeepers and its main grain trader were also slowly increasing their landholdings by buying land from poorer households. Three of these five men were also involved in brickmaking: theirs was a petty capitalism of multiple rather than single activities. The amounts may be small, but between them they will soon have bought nearly 10% of the village's land, edging up numbers of landless households, and strengthening links between the appropriation of surplus value in the circulation of commodities and the extraction of surplus value in the production process.

An additional 9% of households in Budumi are increasing their landholdings much more slowly, by combining regular factory work, teaching jobs and *boda* driving (motor-bike taxis). One household has added land primarily by renting out oxen, and another by combining agriculture and livestock-rearing. Pig-rearing, which does not require grazing land, provides relatively fast returns and has increased in recent years.

Meanwhile, 77 out of Budumi's 100 households were net sellers of labour power, of whom over half were primarily wage-labourers. Almost all of them also farmed, if only on tiny plots, and most were petty commodity producers. And so, as well as direct exploitation, these households are subject to exploitation through petty commodity production – both when they work their own land and when they work for other PCPs (see above). The next section discusses these forms of exploitation, and the 'triple exploitation' of working-class women, in relation to both brickmaking and agriculture.

Petty commodity production and exploitation in brickmaking

In 2021 brickmaking was the single largest income source in the village, and the primary occupation of around half the men and a number of teenage boys. Budumi produces as many as 700,000 bricks⁷ a year, and burns several hundred trees in the process – a speck in the broader ecocidal nature of capitalism. Timber, once accessed from family compounds and common village lands, now largely comes from logger-traders.

What may at first sight seem like a relatively homogenous activity is in fact highly differentiated by different forms of exploitation. At the base are wage-labourers and disguised wage-labourers who sell bricks raw because they cannot afford the timber to burn them. Then there are different types of petty commodity producers, and, at the apex, petty capitalists. As in agriculture, there is direct exploitation of labour by capital *and* exploitation through petty commodity production, which has to be understood in relation to its broader context. PCP brickmaking allows loggers to realise their profits at a rate that substantially cuts brickmakers' wages and incomes (besides wage-labour, timber is the only purchased input). It is also a key basis, through the trading of most bricks beyond the village, of the profits of downstream traders and capitalist builders – all of whom appropriate portions of brickmakers' labour

time. PCP brickmaking provides cheap building materials for society in general – bricks used by people who build their own homes (as many members of Budumi and other villages do – although poorer households use unburnt bricks or no bricks), and bricks that are used by builders, above all in urban areas. A key housing input, bricks' relatively low price cheapens the costs of simple reproduction, as well as boosting downstream capital's profits. And so, like agriculture (see below), PCP brickmaking has to be understood as a form of exploitation.

Triple exploitation of labouring class women is less prevalent *within* brickmaking because women worked considerably less than in more feminised, less commercialised agriculture. This, though, is not the case when brickmaking is seen as part of the entire social reproduction process, made up mostly of brickmaking, agriculture and reproductive labour. Women do almost all of the reproductive labour, and the bulk of agricultural work. Men do most of the work in brickmaking, which brings higher incomes and rates of profit. And within agriculture they do more work on commercial crops. This is all part of a gendered division of labour and gender-differentiated forms of exploitation (for example, Akram-Lodhi 2018). These unequal distributions of work and wages do not preclude elements of cooperation and interdependence (O'Laughlin 1995; Asiimwe 2010, 4), but do reflect the varying degree to which wage-labour and petty commodity production are marked by patriarchy.

Brickmaking is mostly done through PCP that involves family labour and labour exchange. Labour exchange is greater than in agriculture as it is easier to exchange like for like: taking turns to work on each other's 1000 bricks is simpler than working on different-sized pieces of land with different characteristics. A brick is a brick, but no two fields are the same. Net labour-hiring petty commodity production is the next most common form of brick production, and petty capitalism the least common.

Petty capitalist brickmakers and wage-labourers

Most of Budumi's petty capitalists are involved in brickmaking. The logger pays Budumi labourers to burn raw bricks bought, often with maize-flour, from the village's poorest brickmakers who lack the means to buy timber. The timber is cut down with his chainsaw by labourers from other villages. For this, the logger makes a profit approaching 100 times⁸ more than the brickmakers' daily wage (albeit only once or twice a year). In other words, the village's most rapid accumulator exploits disguised wage-labourers relatively intensively. Others, such as the village's main grain trader, also buy raw bricks but their profits are reduced by having to purchase timber.

Meanwhile, 10–20% of those involved in brickmaking usually or only make raw bricks, which are sold to petty capitalists and some better-off PCPs as a disguised form of piece-rate wage-labour. They do also sometimes sell raw bricks to neighbours for use in their homes, this time as petty commodity producers. The 'wage' for raw bricks is only marginally higher than brickmaking wages, but considerably higher than largely feminised agricultural wage-labour. Disguised wage-labourers are more likely to work alone, but they do also exchange labour in small groups. And some migrate to Kampala.

The village's one brick trader (out of five in the parish) accumulates through brickmaking and trading, but at a slower rate than the logger. He did some of his brickmaking work himself, but mostly hired labour. Brick traders link brickmakers to buyers, observe delivery and manage payments. The official cut is 5% but more is made by selling above the stated price and paying truckdrivers to look the other way.⁹ Brick trading is contentious due to disagreements over prices and breakages, which are in effect distributional conflicts

between labourers, petty commodity producers, petty capitalist brickmakers and traders, and forms of construction capital.

There were also a handful of better-off families who occasionally make bricks using their own trees, usually to pay for things like higher-education fees or housebuilding. They take time to find the highest price. They mostly hired labour and, like petty capitalists and net hiring-in PCPs, always did so for the labour-extensive brick-burning process. Burning gangs are mostly made up of younger men, and some poorer middle-aged men. It takes up to 24 hours and involves sleeping out – something some do as often as three days a week in the dry season, before shifting to agricultural labour in the wet season. Burning brings higher incomes from longer hours of work (around US\$6.75 for an 18-hour shift).

Petty commodity producer brickmakers

Petty commodity production brickmaking is much more common than petty capitalist production, and more common than wage-labour (more so than in agriculture). There are three main types of PCP brickmakers: those who are net hirers-in, those who generally only work with family labour, and poorer PCPs who slide between petty commodity production and the forms of disguised wage-labour referred to above (see **Table 3**). As noted, labour exchange is significantly more common within brickmaking than agricultural PCP. Net hiring-in PCPs form groups that do most of the first four brickmaking processes together – digging, mixing, moulding and laying. Labour-sharing boosts incomes from this labour-intensive non-mechanised process. But net hiring-in PCPs pay others to ‘tunnel’ and ‘burn’, and they burn larger amounts of bricks. The better-off among them sometimes buy raw bricks to burn, while the less well-off among them may also sometimes work for other brickmakers. Timber purchases are often funded by selling livestock and by loans from savings groups.¹⁰ Poorer PCPs also borrow from savings groups, but less as they find it harder to repay. Others are too poor to borrow.

Petty commodity producers who do not hire labour draw more on family labour – similar to the higher levels of ‘self-exploitation’ found among poorer PCP farmers. In households with teenage boys, work is done mostly or entirely with family labour. In such cases, as in agriculture (see below), fathers may appropriate the labour of other family members. Family labour-based PCPs burn more frequently but burn fewer bricks each time, which is a disadvantage as you need more timber to burn shallower soils and the bricks are more likely to crack, often costing 10% of a load.

Poorer brickmakers with less family labour operate through smaller labour-exchange groups (two to four people). They may also work as wage-labourers. These petty commodity producers do not hire in labour, even for burning, but nor do they usually sell raw bricks to finance timber purchases, which distinguishes them from disguised wage-labourers, who are more likely to sell raw bricks – some to buy timber to burn the remainder of their bricks, and others, the poorest, to get by.

As will become clear in the next section, there are many similarities with agriculture, but also differences. Agriculture is less commercialised, less profitable and more feminised. It also has less labour exchange, which means that the exploitation of wage-labour through PCP is more common in agriculture than it is in brickmaking. Meanwhile brickmaking wage-labour was more likely to be disguised. In addition, while most agricultural produce remained in the village, most bricks left it.

Table 3. Varieties of brickmaking: capital, petty commodity production and labour.

	Bricks burnt each time and selling price (USh)	Times per year	Approximate annual income (USh)	Estimated daily income
Capital (also logger)	20,000 sold @ 170	1–2	900,000 (US\$257) – 1.8 m (US\$514)	900,000 (US\$257) (1 day of management)
Petty capital (also brick/grain trader)	10,000 sold @ 165	2	1.93 m (US\$551)	48,250 (US\$13.79)
Landowning brickmakers	Occasional brickmaking for specific ends			
Net hiring-in PCPs	8000 sold @ 165	2	1.78 m (US\$509)	29,700 (US\$8.49)
PCPs	4000 sold @ 160	4	1.86 m (US\$529)	29,100 (US\$8.31)
Labourer-PCPs	4000 sold @ 160	3	1.39 m (US\$397)	20,900 (US\$5.97)
Disguised wage-labourers/wage-labourers	3–5000 sold @ 35	2	220,000–350,000 (US\$100)	10,000 (US\$2.86)
Wage labour			800,000 (US\$229)	8000 (US\$2.29)
Specialist burning gangs (mostly younger men)	Earn more from longer hours			

Note: PCPs = petty commodity producers.

Exploitation in agriculture

Exploitation and wage-labour: family and neighbour labour gangs

Agricultural labour in Budumi is mostly done in small groups, but also on an individual basis. Forms of exploitation vary across relations with petty capital and petty commodity producers, and in how much they are mediated by patriarchy. Less hierarchical ‘neighbour’ labour gangs made up of those in ‘horizontal’ neighbour or kinship relations contrast to more hierarchical and patriarchal ‘family groups’ rooted in nuclear or extended families. In the latter the appropriation of women’s labour is widespread despite their tending to do more work. There can also be hierarchies *between* women, although these are not discrete from broader patriarchal norms – hierarchies between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, for example, or between daughters-in-law who do or do not have children of a working age. The underpayment of women’s and children’s wages, as noted above, cheapens labour-power for capital in general and is related to the undervaluing of women’s reproductive labour (Federici 2004).

The more commercialised the agricultural crop, the more likely men are to participate in wage-labour, and the more capital–labour relations are mediated by patriarchal dynamics. Men are drawn to such crops as wages are higher on average than they are for subsistence crops like sweet potato. Such gendered inequalities have been linked to colonial social divisions of labour that contributed to gendered associations with cash and subsistence crops (Asiimwe 2010, 3; also Stoler 1977 on Indonesia). Men are also more likely to work on the more common piece-rate basis than on a time-rate basis alongside the farmer. In part this is because the wage level is slightly higher for piece-rate work, but above all it is because whoever negotiates a piece-rate contract with a farmer has significant influence over the distribution of work and wages. It was primarily this that differentiated agricultural wages between men, women and children.

Households with teenage children are more likely to be in family gangs, while those with younger children are more likely to belong to neighbour gangs. Three types of ‘family gangs’ were identified: parents-and-teenager groups, mother-and-teenager groups, and large extended family gangs. Exploitation through parents-and-teenager groups was highly gendered, and also marked by generational inequalities. Men typically negotiated with landowners and received payment from them. They often worked less as they spent part of the time looking for additional verbal piece-rate contracts to maximise the family’s wage-labour in a given season – agreeing to multiple jobs intensified the labour process to shorten the job completion time. In a minority of cases, there was a good level of ‘cooperation’ between husband and wife. In these cases women were better off working with their husbands. But key informants were clear that men usually took most of the money for themselves, and that in at least three couples out of four, women and their children were better off if they worked alone, with their children, or with female neighbours (see also Asiimwe 2010). Women from these parents-and-teenager groups did additional work on food crops, sometimes for in-kind wages. Women and poorer households were more likely to be paid in kind, and more likely to work on non-commercial food crops.

Extended family labour gangs were also characterised by gender- and generation-based inequalities, and in some cases by inequalities between women. One three-generation family gang was made up of a widow, two sons and daughters-in-law, a divorced daughter, and the teenage children of the older son and daughter-in-law. It was dominated by the

older woman and the older daughter-in-law with working teenage sons. The two adult men worked selectively while a disproportionate amount of work fell on the younger women and children. The younger women were the daughter-in-law whose children were too young for work, and who was exhausted from working in the fields when we arrived to talk, and a divorced daughter who referred to ‘working for others for free’.

In contrast to more hierarchical family labour gangs, there were a number of ‘neighbour labour gangs’. These were made up of neighbours and those in more horizontal kinship relations. They had a more equal distribution of wages and work, even in mixed-gender gangs. Such gangs included a group of young men still living at home, three daughters-in-law living in nearby houses, and a gang of four women and a man who were neighbours. Two of the women in this gang had been left by their husbands, and the other two had unreliable partners.

Members of this last gang had next to no land and worked in a neighbouring village for one of the parish’s largest landowners, working piece rate on four acres of land. With each acre taking up 1000 hours of work together with post-harvesting processes, this was enough to employ the five gang members for most of the year, in marked contrast to those who struggled to access half as much work, even in peak season – perhaps due to weaker social ties, fractious intra-household relations undermining cooperation in the labour market, or simply physical distance from employers’ houses.

They worked on a piece-rate basis, which is usually more intensive than time-rated work. The faster the job is done, the higher the daily wage and the greater the share of that season’s jobs your group can do, meaning, in effect, that the dearth of wage-labour intensified the labour process in what was a labour-surplus village. Rather than the usual three hours per day, a piece-rate gang may work for five. This particular neighbour labour gang preferred their long-term labour relation due to the quantity and reliability of the work, and also because if one of their children got sick, they were given advance payments on their wages. Repaying cash loans would be difficult for them, so they preferred this form of moneylending as it was repaid (including any ‘interest’) with unpaid additional work rather than with cash. This was seen as a better option than borrowing from women’s savings groups whose office holders might visit their homes and appropriate the equivalent value in kind if they defaulted, and better than leasing out or selling their small parcels of land at below market rates to wealthier members of the village. One respondent from a nearby house had just rented out her land to the village’s grain trader at half the going rate to pay an urgent medical bill for her son – indicative not only of unequal and oppressive economic relations within the village, but also of the impacts of the absence of free healthcare (see below). It was also evidence of the slow piecemeal differentiation of control over land.

As well as hierarchies of gender and generation, as in brickmaking, there was also evidence of more oppressive exploitation of the poorest households. Various mechanisms were used to increase the rate of exploitation of the poorest who have less bargaining power and go through relatively prolonged periods of reduced food consumption. Wages were pushed down, in-kind wages were more common, work was sometimes unpaid, and small plots of land sometimes given in lieu of wage payment, stabilising landowners’ access to cheap wage-labour. One of the poorest families – headed by a near-landless man with five daughters – had four such tiny ‘gardens’ of cassava and sweet potatoes. The long two-year school closure during the Covid-19 pandemic had slashed his access to agricultural wage-labour as his two or three regular employers had teenage children who became

available for agricultural labour. To get by he made more raw bricks and did more ‘tenant-keeping’ (Cliffe 1977, 200) – a disguised form of wage-labour that involved taking care of better-off households’ cows, goats and pigs for a share of the offspring. The ‘tenant-keeper’ usually got the second kid/calf of goats and cows, and around 40% of a pig’s litter. When the time spent caring for animals is taken into account, along with some animal feed costs, the tenant-keeper may get a quarter of the value, or less, making this a particularly low-paid form of disguised wage-labour.

Exploitation through petty commodity production

While the previous section focused more on direct forms of exploitation, this section focuses more on exploitation through agricultural petty commodity production. While most households did this, less than 10% accumulated, even at a low level. The remainder – those belonging to classes of labour – mixed petty commodity production, subsistence production and wage-labour. Some households mostly got by from their own land while others were almost entirely dependent on wage-labour. Similar to brickmaking, exploitation through agricultural PCP relates to the supply of cheap foodstuffs like maize and beans through the suppression of prices paid to non-accumulating PCPs, which contributes to downstream traders’ profits and allows capital in general to hold wages down, compete and accumulate. It also relates to the incomes and profits of downstream traders, and to the fact that agricultural petty commodity production’s inability to furnish the simple reproduction of the vast majority of Budumi’s households means that petty commodity producers also provide labour-power and reproductive labour-saving commodities like street food. This section focuses on the two key elements of exploitation through petty commodity production: PCP without accumulation, and wage-labour for non-accumulating PCPs. Most households did both, although the poorer the household the greater their involvement in wage-labour tended to be.

Agricultural petty commodity production, like agricultural wage-labour, was mostly done by women – around three times as much as men (a figure that corresponds to national-level estimates, see also Nuwagaba 2017, 35). And within agricultural PCP, as in agricultural wage-labour, men mostly focused on the more commercialised crops, skewing PCP incomes towards them. Men tended to control crop sales, and the income that came from them, in a similar vein to agricultural wages.

Among non-accumulating petty commodity producers, somewhat better-off ones with fewer family workers were the most likely to hire labour, especially when a woman was in the advanced stages of pregnancy or caring for a newly born. Those with teenage children, meanwhile, and especially poorer households with smaller landholdings, mostly or entirely cultivated with family labour. While the near-landless often worked for petty capitalist landowners with a consistent need for labour-power (see above), poorer PCP-labourers were drawn to smaller farmers with less family labour, whose sporadic requirements for labour-power suited their own need to sometimes work their own land.

These wage-labour relations between members of classes of labour appear to be direct exploitation until they are located in the broader totality of capitalist relations experienced by labouring class employer and labouring class employee. And when they are (see above), both the non-accumulating labouring class employer and labouring class employee are understood as subject to ‘exploitation through PCP’.

One small PCP farmer, who owned an acre and rented another, had no other household labour to draw on, and employed a friend and her four children. Both their husbands worked in the Kampala region. The farmer sometimes made and sold street food to make ends meet, and had some income from livestock-rearing. The ‘employee’ owned half an acre and made bricks with her children. Payments were mostly on a per-task piece-rate basis – usually below the going rate. One particularly long task was paid at less than half the going rate, which was still enough to put food on the table with five people working, and this at a time of the year, long after the previous harvest, when food stores were running dry.

Struggling to make a living from agriculture’s low and erratic yields, let alone accumulate, this petty commodity producer, like others, sometimes struggled to pay full wages. Or, to put it another way, her exploitation in relation to capital in general also involved more oppressive exploitation of wage-labourers: not by her as their direct employer, but, like her, by the broader conditions of their reproduction under patriarchal capitalism. This particular single female PCP employer with young children earns less than a half of what some better-off farmers earn from the same amount of land – her income reduced by rent, high labour and transport costs, and harvests reduced by a frequent inability to complete tasks at the right time due to issues with access to cash and labour (**Table 4**, row 2).

Classes of labour and differentiation through farming

Dynamics of differentiation within agricultural production are significant in themselves, but also in how they shape forms of exploitation by lowering incomes and bargaining power, and increasing dependence on wage-labour for some, but not others. Concrete forms of exploitation, as Bernstein has noted (1979, 425), are ‘mediated through the place each household occupies in the total nexus of relations of commodity production and exchange’.

Agricultural incomes and yields in Budumi were highly unequal. Better-off farmers cultivating on better soils with fertilisers made a small profit if three or more acres were cultivated. The two examples in **Table 4** (rows 4 and 5) are petty capitalists – one a provisions store owner, the other the logger referred to above.

As well as soil type (sandy, black or clay), soil fertility (its levels of minerals and nutrients), and the use of fertilisers, differentiation was driven by variations in seed quality, rain-water retention, the ability to complete tasks at the optimal time, crop transport costs, the number of family workers and related labour costs, storage facilities, the terms of access to the market (both for selling produce and buying seeds), and whether land is owned or rented. Rainfall can double or halve yields from one year to the next for all. Fertilisers can boost yields by 50%, but less than a quarter of households could afford them. Maize prices fluctuated by 50% and bean prices by 300% between October 2020 and September 2023, so the timing of sales affects the price substantially and poorer farmers are less able to wait for prices to rise. These dynamics combine to produce highly uneven incomes, drive differentiation and shape forms of exploitation. An important aside is that these examples also underline the potential, via public investment, to increase agricultural incomes for all and thereby reduce dependence on wage-labour and increase the bargaining power of poorer households.

Triple exploitation

Triple exploitation, as defined above, refers to the patriarchally intensified forms of exploitation experienced by women in wage-labour, petty commodity production and

Table 4. Estimated annual incomes of 5 farmers from 1 acre of intercropped maize and beans (February to October).^a

	Type of farmer	Characteristics of key variables	Costs	Net income/ profit (US\$)
1	Labourer with a little land (income is per acre, and they own around half an acre)	Owned land, bought seed, hand-ploughed, no fertiliser, all family labour, sandy soil, low sale prices – the most common pattern in the village	147,000	573,000 (US\$164)
2	Worse-off petty commodity producer	Rented land, mix of bull- and hand-ploughed, usually saved seed, fertiliser, around 60% hired labour, sandy soil, high transport costs, medium-high sales price	612,500	457,500 (US\$131)
3	Better-off petty commodity producer	Owned land, saved seed, fertiliser, bull-ploughed, hand-levelled, around 50/50 hired/family labour; sandy soil, low transport cost, medium-low sales price	268,000	742,000 (US\$212)
4	Petty capitalist with rented land	Rented land, saved seed, fertiliser, plough with own bulls, 60–65% hired labour, black soil, high transport costs, high sales price	660,000	1,140,000 (US\$326)
5	Petty capitalist with owned land	Owned land, mix of saved and bought seed, bull-ploughed, no fertiliser, fertile clay-soil, 75% hired labour, low transport costs, high sales price	420,000	1,450,000 (US\$414)

Note: ^aThese figures are based on three different yield levels linked to use of fertiliser and soil productivity (276–660 kg maize and 170–378 kg of beans, depending on the household). The figures also reflect the different expenditure on seeds (saved or bought), fertiliser, labour (and ploughing), transport, and different soil fertility, whether land is rented/owned, and varying market prices. The three constants are i) an assumption, based on interviews, that more than half of the produce is consumed at home across all households; ii) an assumption that the main activities occur at the same time; and iii) average yields based on key informant discussions. These are very similar to Goldman and Heldenbrand's estimates (2002, 68) from four villages in Mbale district in 1997. Source: Fieldwork data.

reproductive labour. As has been made clear, women do more work across the productive and reproductive spheres but earn less both from PCP and wage-labour, especially when they work with their husbands. They also own less. Interviews and key informant discussions indicated that around 10% of the land was owned by women – this in a context where a big majority lived patrilocally after marriage, and land was normally inherited patrilineally. Both widows and divorcees were vulnerable to losing access to land. Twenty-two per cent of Budumi households were female-led due to migration, a husband's death or divorce. Of the six that had divorced, half had retained land and a house in their husband's village, and the other half had lost all access to land and returned to their native village.

Women's work in the productive sphere is less commercially oriented. It is also shaped spatially and temporally by their disproportionate reproductive labour burdens, meaning that they usually work closer to home. Many women spent the best part of an hour a day collecting firewood on top of the usual activities of breast-feeding, child-minding, washing, cooking and cleaning. Men were more likely to leave home for longer periods for work, as migrants, and to socialise and drink, especially as they get older. In other words, patriarchy shaped social space and types of consumption, as well as divisions of labour, wages and land. And it also meant that women were much more likely to experience domestic violence.¹¹

Women-only savings groups provided some counterpoint to patriarchy, both in terms of providing a collective female social space (Pattenden 2016; Baglioni 2022) and by facilitating loans that men may not know about. Nevertheless, here as elsewhere (Guérin,

Morvant-Roux, and Villarreal 2014), slightly better-off households borrow more because they can repay loans more easily.

The outcomes of male migration were highly uneven: in some cases incomes were enhanced by urban wages sent home, but in others incomes dropped because the amounts sent home were less than the village wages men had shared with their families. And in some cases no money was sent home at all, worsening conditions and increasing pressures on women to earn alongside reproductive labour burdens.

Post-marriage patrilocality tended to weaken women's socio-political position. And the gender of her children, and whether she had them or not, had significant impacts on her status and long-term economic security. The divorcee referred to earlier, who said she worked 'for free' after returning to her natal family, only had female children – something which a key informant said was sometimes seen as the equivalent of being 'childless', as in later life girls would likely be married into other villages and there would be no one left to take care of the parents. Bride-price remained partially paid, or not paid at all, especially among poorer households. Some men, meanwhile, terminated marriages that only produced female children.

When daughters marry the family labour force dwindles. When sons marry the family gains a pair of hands, but it also leads, sooner or later, to land being divided. More extended forms of family labour tend to slowly eke into more nuclear forms, and the cycle begins again. Older folk work on bits of land they retain or on their children's land, but most eventually become economically dependent on their children. Further physical decline brings dependence on others for household tasks, especially granddaughters. The changing allocations of productive and reproductive labour across extended and nuclear families, along with varying dependence on hired labour, take manifold forms that modify the details of exploitation and patriarchy, and further differentiate society along class and gendered lines.

The neo-colonial absence of public services

This article has focused on concrete forms of exploitation in Budumi. It has said little of broader national class dynamics, or world-historical colonial and neo-colonial contexts – all of which have a bearing on class and gender relations in villages like Budumi. This section will resolve this to a limited degree by sketching connections between material conditions and social relations in Budumi on the one hand, and on the other the neo-colonial absence of public services, legacies of conflict and the assertion of neoliberal preferences for individualised approaches to poverty reduction, and private rather than public services.

Although mediated by national and regional ruling classes in ways that are beyond the scope of this paper (see, for example, Asiimwe 2018), the absence of free public services is termed here as a 'neo-colonial absence' to underline the deep contemporary material impacts of colonialism and neo-colonialism, which shape relations of exploitation in villages like Budumi. Low levels of state provisioning mean that private service providers drain a significant share of wages and incomes from petty commodity production. In doing so they increase, in gendered ways, dependence on wage-labour and vulnerability to oppressive forms of exploitation. The labouring class family who rented a piece of land on the cheap to the main village grain trader against a loan for an urgent medical bill for their son is a case in point. Free public healthcare would have avoided this situation. There

are other similar cases involving repayment of loans through unpaid labour. There are also more ‘everyday’ chronic medical expenses, above all for the treatment of endemic malaria of which there are multiple annual episodes in every household.

Government healthcare facilities are neither trusted nor free, with medicines routinely sold on the black market rather than being provided free at the point of delivery, as has been found elsewhere in Uganda (Asiimwe 2018; Nystrand and Tamm 2018). Malaria alone requires an average annual household expenditure equating to around 25 mornings of agricultural labour, or around a fifth of the average maize yield. Around 10% of households have children that suffer frequent bouts of acute malaria, which costs two to six times more to treat than more standard bouts. And as well as diagnosing illnesses, medical staff assess the capacity to pay bills and may cheapen poorer people’s treatments – an example of the embodied costs of the absence of public services. In the education sector, private service providers’ charges also erode incomes. The poor quality of public education means that around a third of children attend private schools, including children from poorer families. This incurs costs of around 75 mornings of agricultural labour or *most* of the average maize harvest.

As well as the absence of free public services, there are few resources for poverty reduction, and a lack of public support for smallholder farming and employment generation (Bategeka, Kiiza, and Kasirye 2013; World Bank 2016; Asiimwe 2018; see also Mamdani 1987, 217). The village was not electrified and had insufficient drinking water sources. As in other regions (Nystrand and Tamm 2018), there was no evidence of access to social security, and limited evidence of individualised access to government development funds: a handful of farmers have received seeds or saplings through Operation Wealth Creation. Other programmes, such as the Uganda Women’s Empowerment Programme and the Youth Livelihood Fund, have focused on disbursing loans to groups for micro-enterprise, but with average disbursements of one per village every five years, we were unable to find any examples.

This smattering of micro-entrepreneurship loans reflects neoliberal policymaking’s prioritisation of individualism and private-sector service provisioning in Uganda over 30 years (Wiegatz, Martiniello, and Greco 2018a). A recently launched Parish Development Programme has begun to increase disbursements to parishes relative to sub-counties (Ministry of Local Government 2021). This has the potential to improve some individual households’ material conditions, or to make more generalised improvements if collective claims are made for improved water supply or electrification. The programme, though, is about shoring up political support bases as well as distributing development funds, and so the outcomes are far from certain.¹²

Neoliberal policy and International Monetary Fund (IMF)/World Bank loans have long supported private-sector service provisioning over universal public access (Asiimwe 2018; Lie 2018; Nystrand and Tamm 2018; Ssali 2018; Wiegatz, Martiniello, and Greco 2018b), and placed individual entrepreneurialism at the centre of poverty reduction strategies (Wilson 2018; World Bank n.d.). The promotion of individually oriented poverty reduction strategies focused on market inclusion overlooks the everyday relations of exploitation and dispossession that characterise global capitalist society.

Neoliberalism has long been central to neocolonialism, and to the contemporary absence of public services, as is colonialism itself. After withdrawing physically, successive British governments, along with their counterparts in the global North, practised neo-colonialism

across most of Africa to preserve strategic geopolitical influence and defend economic interests, often galvanising conflicts and undermining state capacity to provide public services and investment (Nkrumah 1987 [1965]; Ngonzola-Ntalaja 2002). Neo-colonialism in Uganda can be traced back to its year of independence, 1962, when the World Bank encouraged increased production of the same raw materials that the direct-rule colonialists had coveted (Mamdani 1984, 23). A few years later, in the midst of economic crisis and competition between factions of national capital, the first post-colonial head of state, Milton Obote, pushed for partial nationalisation. The alarmed neo-colonial British state, along with Israeli government counterparts, sponsored a military coup led by Idi Amin (Mamdani 1984, 31), whose regime then subjected Uganda to a prolonged period of state violence that inflamed inter-regional tensions, and directly contributed to civil wars.

Neoliberal policies were subsequently concretised through conditional IMF/World Bank loans (Wiegratz, Martiniello, and Greco 2018a). These were initially acceded to reluctantly by the National Resistance Movement government, which is still in power almost four decades after it won a 1980s civil war. But it soon began to implement them with a degree of vigour and the flow of funds became hard-wired into the political economy of the Ugandan state and the reproduction of its ruling class (Lie 2018). As well as steering policy towards patchy private-sector rather than universal state provisioning, multilateral loans also undermine state capacity through repayments. In 2021 debt servicing accounted for 14.5% of government spending, of which multilateral loans (above all from the World Bank) made up the largest part (Jubilee Debt 2021).

Further back, different Ugandan regions played different roles in British colonialists' appropriation of wealth (Cliffe 1977). For example, the north primarily acted as a labour reserve, and more recently in postcolonial Uganda as a 'land reserve' (Martiniello 2019), while in the Eastern region, where this article's fieldwork village is located, farmers were press-ganged into growing cotton to supply the colonialists' textile industry and drive its industrialisation (Vincent 1982, 212–215; Beckert 2014). Dressed up as free trade in state propaganda, the British colonialists commandeered the bulk of profits through trading monopolies (Mamdani 1984), and, from 1909 to 1922, used forced labour to pump-prime their system of organised theft (Vincent 1982). As elsewhere, they used divide-and-rule strategies to strengthen their position, thereby fuelling legacies of civil war that cost many lives and diverted social expenditure for decades (Branch 2005; Atkinson 2018). The impacts of British colonialists' appropriation of Ugandan wealth did not end in 1962: they have been further exacerbated by neocolonialism and neoliberalism and continue to affect the material and political conditions of the Ugandan people.

Conclusion

This article has illustrated three key forms of exploitation in rural eastern Uganda – more 'direct' forms of exploitation, the more indirect process of exploitation through petty commodity production, and the triple exploitation of working-class women. It has demonstrated the prevalence of processes of gendered exploitation and differentiation within a village where everyone owns less than two hectares of land, and sketched some of the links to colonialism, neo-colonialism and neoliberalism. Differentiation through agriculture, brickmaking, logging, trade and migration is accelerating alongside the depletion of natural resources.

Outmigration is on the rise, relocating sites of direct exploitation, and gendering exploitation in new ways with no let-up in the appropriation of women's reproductive labour.

'Food sovereignty' in Budumi is impossible because land is too scarce, grazing lands all but lost, organic manure in short supply, and fallowing unusual. Farming still plays an important role in simple reproduction, and policies to support smallholders, including agroecological soil supplements like biochar, could sustainably improve material conditions, but within clear limits.

Enhanced support for small farmers, actually free public healthcare and education, increased female control over land, measures to redress the patriarchal nature of social life, and increased female and male access to non-agricultural employment – as others have indicated both for Uganda and Africa more generally (Oya and Pontara 2015b; Van Waeyenberge and Bargawi 2018) – would all have positive impacts on material conditions, while softening the oppressiveness of exploitation.

Analysing concrete forms of gendered exploitation within villages is as important as analysing broader dynamics of appropriation and dispossession: the two are co-constituted, and so challenging either requires better understanding of both. Modifying socio-political dynamics, loosening oppressive relations and improving material conditions within villages cannot be seen in isolation from modifying broader regional, national and world-historical structures of oppression, and vice versa.

Notes

1. Compare, for example, Pattenden 2016, where oppression and exploitation within Indian villages are prominent, and Pattenden and Wastuti 2023, where exploitation is primarily driven by capitalists from outside of Indonesian villages.
2. This is around double the 2016/17 poverty rate for the Eastern region (36%) (Development Initiatives 2021), which overtook the Northern region as Uganda's poorest region in the mid 2010s. The estimated 75% poverty rate is around four times higher than the official national rate, but similar to a recent estimate that 90.9% live in or near multidimensional poverty (UNDP 2015, cited in Asiimwe 2018, 155), and an older one that put chronic poverty at 77% nationally (Lawson, McKay, and Okidi 2006). It is almost certainly an under-estimate. The Budumi statistic is based on household income data, and a poverty line in 2021 of 3.58 million Ugandan shillings (US\$) per year for an average household of 5.5 people. It equates to around US\$0.50 per person per day and so is well below the usual threshold used for ascertaining poverty levels within Uganda (around US\$1 [World Bank 2016, 4]), indicating that considerably more than 75% are below the poverty line. The figure of US\$3.58 million was derived by adding together a basic services and shopping basket that included maize, beans, tomatoes, onions, fruit, seasoning, salt, snacks (US\$500 worth per day), sugar, five chickens per household per year, cooking oil, soap, clothes (mostly second-hand), healthcare (US\$60,000 [see also Ssali 2018, 193]), education (two-thirds government, one-third private as per the village average – US\$240,000 for three children including payments for such things as parent-teacher associations), solar power, housing (US\$50,000, based on a figure of one million shillings to construct a mud and timber house that lasts for

20 years), social costs (@ USh70,000 for funerals, brideprice that is paid by some, church donations), a litre of *marua* per week, telephone costs (USh1000 per day), and limited public transport to attend social functions of friends and family. It is assumed that firewood and water are collected (at a cost of over 1 mostly female labour hours per day). The USh3.58 million poverty line also takes into account the subsistence elements of agricultural production.

3. The cut-off between being predominantly PCP and wage-labour contains some margin of error as the balance of hiring in and hiring out across agriculture and brickmaking was hard to pin down entirely accurately, and in some cases the margins were quite small.
4. Based on interview data and detailed discussions with key informants.
5. Based on all working adults of 20 years and over, and half a unit for all teenagers aged 15–19 years old. Temporary migrant workers were also included. The number of working hours of physical work was assumed at 5 hours a day for 6 days a week (so 30 hours for adults and 15 hours for 15 to 19-year-olds).
6. Based on discussions in Mbale with key informants from those villages.
7. A very rough estimate based on the average number of times brickmakers burn bricks in a year, and the median number of bricks burned each time.
8. A precise figure is not possible as the amount paid for accessing the timber is unknown. In order to make a rough estimate, a 50/50 split has been assumed here between the logger and the gatekeepers who control access to the timber and include state officials.
9. Larger traders with storage facilities use 20% seasonal price fluctuations as a basis for accumulation, but are located outside the village.
10. Also used to buy animals and agricultural inputs, and to pay for schooling and healthcare costs. There are women's groups, mixed groups and Kasale groups.
11. Since fieldwork, an organisational structure for challenging domestic violence has been set up in Budumi and linked to higher levels of the state. It appears to be having a substantive impact.
12. This statement is primarily based on informal discussions with past and present local government officers.

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