This couplet rightly applies to East Africa rural women. These women like their counterparts in the rest of the world play multiple roles. They are sisters who nurse their family members, they are wives who look after their husband’s house, they are mothers who take care of their children, and they are the first teacher of their children. Not only they play the role of the father by earning and providing monetary support to the family. They also perform a unique role of ‘Bread Winner’ when they send money to their husbands and sons who have migrated to urban areas in search of jobs. They keep the household running on meagre resources. They have had a strong, historic and continuing role in food production, processing and marketing. They have the highest female participation rate in agriculture of all regions of the world. Approximately 80% of East African rural women are involved in food production. They are the one who bear the responsibility of feeding the families. This is only a part of their work load. Prior to cooking they have to fetch water and fuel, which take several hours of each day. They have to upkeep dwellings and surroundings, take care of clothing, take care of children and elderly folk of the family. They also help in sustaining the social and family traditions.

Unfortunately their backbreaking tasks go uncounted, undervalued and uncompensated. In spite of their major contribution to the national economy they are not considered as contributors and that’s why they are excluded from the means of production and resources of production.

Though this thesis, an attempt has been made to throw a light on the lives of these women. Our aim here, however, has not been primarily to explain the reasons for women’s subordination, though historical as well as modern trends concerning women
have been discussed. Rather we consider how available knowledge of women’s role and status in East Africa is relevant to the women’s development. What do the government machinery and other agencies need to know in planning the development programmes. We try here to depict some of the forces that have shaped their lives. Evidence shows the vital role they play in the family and therefore, in national economics, and how this role is being affected by changes brought about by the historical and modern processes.

The objective of this study is to review the information available on the social and economic status of rural women in the home and the community and their role in the processes involved in the production, harvesting and processing of food and other commodities from the land. The present work neither claim to be a complete survey of the position of women in East Africa today nor to have covered all the relevant work, which is currently in progress. Only we have tried to present a clear picture of the material available to us on the lives of these women.

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While the credit goes to others, the errors are mine alone.

SURAIYA TABASSUM