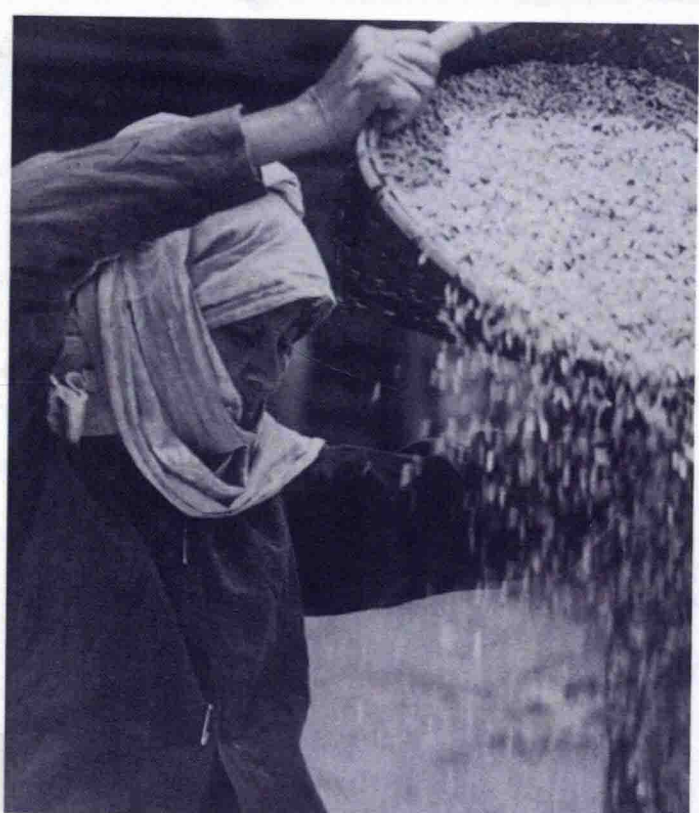


# THE DOMESTICATION OF WOMEN

Discrimination in Developing Societies



BARBARA ROGERS

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**THE DOMESTICATION OF WOMEN**  
**Discrimination in Developing Societies**

*To my mother, Mary Katherine Rogers,  
with love*

# The Domestication of Women Discrimination in Developing Societies

*Barbara Rogers*

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Since I have no wife to do my typing, I have relied heavily on the professional services of Sue Field Reid, Barbara Moxley and Tricia Newbury. I remain responsible, of course, for all the inadequacies of this book, and hope that it will nevertheless be a part of the process of discussion and action on the issue of discrimination against women in development planning.





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# Introduction

Women have been discovered — after a fashion. The development agencies are starting special projects for women all over the place, women's sections are set up in many countries, and there is even a United Nations Decade for Women with its own bureaucracy and series of conferences. Academics are engaged in profound debates about the 'status of women' and how it relates to their share of the work, while major questions remain unresolved about who should be speaking for Third World women.

At the same time, however, a survey of new books on development reveals that, apart from a handful of specialized books on women (of which this is one), development studies remain firmly orientated towards men, men being synonymous with all people. A search through the shelves of any library or bookshop specializing in development studies is likely to provide little or nothing by way of references to women and their work, the division of labour, gender roles generally, or even the euphemistic 'family labour'. In fact, the situation is even worse than it used to be, perhaps because of the new reliance on quantitative methods to provide an 'objective' view of economic development. In researching this topic, I was struck by the fact that for any reference to women's work in agriculture, by far the most important sector, it is necessary to go back to the colonial writers. And as this book will try to demonstrate, what is true of the development studies literature is also true of development planning.

This study is not primarily about women, but about how planners relate to them. At a number of meetings, Third World women have made it clear that they are the ones who will analyze their own situation. For Westerners, a more useful contribution is to tackle the problem of the discriminatory processes in their own culture and society, which are being imposed on others through what we like to call development. This book is therefore about planners trained in the Western tradition, and the impact of their received ideas about women in general on poor women in the Third World. I am using the word 'planner'

in a very broad sense to include all those professionals and 'experts' at the decision-making levels of international and bilateral aid agencies, at headquarters and in the field, and national and local officials in the Third World: all those, in fact, who determine the formulation, design and execution of development policies, programs and projects. Almost all of these planners, for reasons discussed in the book, are men. One of the village women I met in Zambia summed up the problem in demanding that I convey her message to these 'big men': the women had done everything they could to help themselves and support each other, and had raised some money by their own efforts although not nearly enough for what they wanted. It was time the planners paid some attention to the women's needs.

The work presented here is in three parts. The first discusses Western male ideology about gender distinctions and the division of labour, and how their interpretations of other societies are used to bolster myths about women's 'natural' place in society. Secondly, the planning process itself is analyzed: discrimination against women in the development agencies, the distortions involved in the research and data collection on which development planning is based, and the relegation of Third World women to special projects in the 'domestic' ghetto. Finally, the discriminatory impact of the planning process is outlined in terms of subsistence agriculture, the sector in which most Third World women are concentrated. The general trends as regards the impact of development planning on women's access to resources and on their work-load are discussed briefly, together with the implications of women's problems for the success or otherwise of the whole development process.

# Part One: Problems of Perception

## Introduction to Part One

The assumptions that development planners make about women in society are almost never stated, but are all the more powerful for that reason. It is thought 'natural' that a woman's place is in the home and that she has a very specific set of tasks which are thought to be universal because they are based on the biological imperatives of sex. The most important role for women, defining their entire life, is portrayed as the bearing and bringing-up of children. A man, on the other hand, is seen as the 'natural' head of the family, its representative in the outside world, and therefore the person with whom planners will deal. Since it is assumed that men control families ('the master in his own home'), any new resources intended for everyone should logically be channelled through them.

Chapter 1 discusses some of the misconceptions held by development planners, as products of the Western tradition, about women and how they relate to men. We review in Chapter 1 some questions about sex and gender, the division of labour, the role of women and men in child-care and the role of women as domestics in modern Western society. In Chapter 2 the definition of the problem in terms of the 'status of women', as it has come to be called, is scrutinized. The ways in which Westerners describe women in what they call 'primitive societies' are also questioned. The processes of discrimination involved in development, with its dual economy relegating women increasingly to the 'underdeveloped' subsistence sector, is presented as a means of understanding what is happening in the Third World today.

# Women and men: the division of labour

## Sex and gender

Sex is a physical distinction; gender is social and cultural. Although masculine or feminine gender is usually associated with male or female sex, this is not an absolute correlation. In Western society a child is conscious of the gender of its upbringing well before it can talk properly, and any attempts to change the gender of rearing because of 'mistaken' sex-labelling (biological characteristics at birth can often be ambiguous) frequently results in severe disturbance after the age of two. Many transsexuals are unambiguously of one sex, but identify themselves as of the opposite gender. A comprehensive survey by Ann Oakley has helped to clarify the important distinction between biological sex and the enormous range of distinctions made by Western society in the name of gender — feminine and masculine.<sup>1</sup>

## Gender and the division of labour

In talking of the division of labour between women and men in different societies we are talking almost exclusively of gender roles rather than sex roles, determined by culture rather than biology. Virtually all human behaviour, including even such 'physical' activities as copulation, childbirth and the parental care without which children cannot survive, is learned behaviour. It varies widely among different societies, and is quite distinct from that of the lower animals where activities are conducted, to a much greater degree, without prior experience or learning. It has been argued by Clifford Geertz that people (whom he calls 'man') are unique in that they are not highly programmed and do not perform actions basic to survival through intrinsic processes, but need to learn.

Geertz stresses that a major fact about our central nervous system is 'the relative incompleteness with which, acting within the confines of autogenous patterns alone, it is able to specify behaviour.' Thus culture is of crucial importance in, among

other things, determining the role of gender. This applies even to sexual activities and to the bearing and rearing of children, as well as to other distinctions less directly linked to biological sex.<sup>2</sup>

Gender-roles, then, are determined to a relatively small extent by sexual characteristics. However, we have to account for the fact that the division of labour by gender is a factor in most, if not all societies. It plays a role in the production process — although the lines of demarcation show almost infinite variation and some societies will have more strictly defined areas of 'female' and 'male' activity than others. Gender is, together with age, a widely used means by which societies make some form of division of labour, a process of specialization which is an important tool of efficiency in any production system. There are many other criteria which are also used, such as racial or other physical distinctions, geographical origin, 'family' or 'tribe' and so on, and also to some extent caste or class. These are all cultural interpretations of physical differences. Margaret Mead, who did pioneering work in revealing the wide range of psychological and cultural traits which can be attached to masculine and feminine gender-roles, found that important characteristics of women in one culture were often those of men in another.<sup>3</sup> She concludes from her field-work:

'Primitive materials, therefore, give no support to the theory that there is a "natural" connexion between conditions of human gestation and appropriate cultural practices.'<sup>4</sup>

There is little physical determinism about which gender performs which role, apart from pregnancy and childbirth (and even these may be elaborately simulated by the father, who would then receive the credit for it).<sup>5</sup> Even where Westerners commonly assume that only women would participate in a particular activity — for example breast-feeding — the pattern is by no means as clear-cut as the Western model would have us believe. Margaret Mead, in an attack on the sexual determinism advocated by Dr John Bowlby and others, promoting the mother as the only person able to care for a baby, has pointed out that in many 'primitive' societies both men and women — including those who have never given birth — may give the breast to a small child, and may offer it premasticated food right from birth.<sup>6</sup> She lists several examples of societies which insist on the men being primarily responsible for infant and child-care.<sup>7</sup> When Manus children were offered dolls for the first time it was the boys who took and played with them,<sup>8</sup> while in other societies this would be seen as consistent with



feminine roles.

### Women's work

The actual pattern of female and male activities will be devised by each society according to its beliefs about the reproductive functions of the sexes. Where many Western societies see rest as appropriate for women in pregnancy and labour, others require hard work and exercise. Childbirth has completely different and incompatible meanings, and is a different kind of event, according to the society in question.<sup>9</sup> Western societies see men as largely superfluous in pregnancy and childbirth; other societies believe them to be vitally concerned, and restrict their activities during their wives' pregnancy. Men may also simulate labour and be treated accordingly;<sup>10</sup> and they may play a large part in nurturing children almost from birth.<sup>11</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski observed that among Australian aborigines, if a child's father dies before it is born the child is killed by the mother. Eskimos of Greenland kill a baby if its mother dies in childbirth, for the same reason.<sup>12</sup> Either variant makes equal sense in terms of the gender which has been socialized in what we call the 'maternal' role.

The reproductive and nurturing roles, however they are assigned by the culture between the two genders, may serve to define broad lines of division among new tasks. George Murdock explains it by saying: 'New tasks as they arise are assigned to one sphere of activities or the other in accordance with convenience and precedent.'<sup>13</sup> These are of course matters of culture and the individual interpretation of culture.

In Western industrial society gender distinctions are commonly rationalized by beliefs about the central importance of women's role in child-rearing, and the imputed operation of a maternal 'instinct'. There is also the assumption that all men are 'naturally' incapable of nurturing children and, to compensate, are 'naturally' stronger than all women, who are deemed incapable of heavy work. The work that women perform, regardless of its actual character, is seen as somehow 'not-work', or at best very light work. In many other societies, the reverse beliefs apply. Malinowski, despite believing implicitly in the Western prescription as to the 'natural' characteristics of women, sums up his observations in *The Sexual Life of Savages*:

'It is easy to see that the amount of work allotted to women is considerably greater and that their labour is much harder than men's