

Edited by  
Leonora Masini and Susan Stratigos

# Women, Households and Change



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*Edited by* Eleonora Masini and Susan Stratigos



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### **Note to the Reader from the UNU**

Analysis of the impact of macro-events on women and the role of women in determining changes in the household is important for a better understanding of society. In conducting such an analysis, the adoption of the life-course approach, both in retrospective and perspective terms, is particularly useful to identify changing relationships among individuals within the same household and the long-term implications that these changes have on the structure of society.

On this basis, the Household, Gender, and Age Project of the United Nations University conducted between 1983 and 1988 a series of case-studies in Colombia, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Kenya, China, and Sri Lanka. After introducing the genesis of the HGA project, its research activities, and the methodology adopted, this volume presents a synthesis of the results of the project research.

## **Acknowledgement**

The United Nations University is grateful to the **Division for the Advancement of Women, United Nations Office at Vienna**, for its editorial contributions that have helped to make possible the publication of this volume.

## FOREWORD

This book is the fruit of an innovative project designed to expand the boundaries of our understanding of women's contribution to development and the obstacles they face to participating and receiving full benefit from it. It began as part of the Household, Gender, and Age programme of the United Nations University, under the leadership of Eleonora Masini. A series of consultations initiated by Elise Boulding took place in Tokyo in 1979, Oslo in 1980, and Dartmouth, New Hampshire, in 1981. These were followed up by Eleonora Masini in meetings in Rome in 1981 and 1982. By this time the fundamental framework and focus of the research was established and in 1982 attention turned to identifying locations and researchers in different regions. This led to a series of national studies based on a common motivation and methodology. The studies varied according to the resources available and the specific problems, but they were linked by a common purpose and for that reason represent comparative research at its best.

The Division for the Advancement of Women of the United Nations Office at Vienna joined the project in its final stages. During a visit to Vienna at the end of 1989 Elise Boulding suggested that assistance was needed to prepare the case-studies for publication and more popular dissemination. The question of the impact of change on women and households was one that the Division was researching more thoroughly as part of its policy analysis work in the context of the implementation of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women, so it had experience to contribute to the project. Using resources of the Trust Fund for the Monitoring, Review, and Appraisal of the Strategies, the Division provided the services of consultant Susan Stratigos to edit the material and assist with the Division's chapter.

The study itself deals in an innovative way with some of the key micro-economic and micro-social aspects of advancement of women: the sharing of responsibilities and power within the household, the cumulative effect of both discrimination and its elimination on cohorts of women. By both its findings and

its methodology, it should open up new areas for thought, research, and action in the effort to achieve equality and equity between women and men.

HEITOR GURGULINO DE SOUZA  
Rector, UNU

MARGARET JOAN ANSTEE  
Director-General, UNOV



## PROLOGUE

In a moment of truth back in 1979, three women from Europe, Africa and North America, sitting on a Programme Advisory Committee established by the Rector of the United Nations University (UNU), suddenly realized that the research programme they were discussing – dealing with pressing world problems of human and social development, natural resources, and food security – was almost completely gender-blind. Even though we were into the fifth year of the United Nations International Women's Decade and the concept of women's participation was supposed to be built into all development research, the proposals before us all assumed a male labour force. You find what you look for, and these researchers were not looking for women.

Wenche Barth Eide of Norway, Frede Chale of Kenya, and I wondered how a more differentiated perception of women and men as agents of change with different but overlapping roles, responsibilities, and contributions could be inserted into development models. We thought in terms of relating macro-phenomena to the micro-realities of daily life. We sought a perspective that could make women visible, yet not repel those who reject the idea that women should be the focus of special studies. The answer was the household. Here, in all its cultural diversity, is the primary living unit of human beings, where the species is reproduced and nurtured, the base from which individuals participate in the whole range of tasks that shape and change a community and a society. Looking at people in households means seeing each member as an individual, a source of reproduction and production, of resistance to change and of change. It means seeing men and women, children and old people in relation to their community as well as in relation to each other. With this concept of the household-in-community as an ecosystem, the Household, Gender, and Age Project was born.

There was understandable resistance among feminist researchers to using this framework to study women. They saw the danger of stereotyping women as homemakers, but others also recognized it as a potential source of new insights

into women's part in modernization. Rector Soedjatmoko of the UNU saw the possibilities, and with his support the project went forward.

The most significant aspect of gender differentiation is women's procreative role, which makes the female life-course much more complex than the male. Once men reach adulthood, their roles do not change much except through seniority, but women's roles change from decade to decade in shifting patterns of production and reproduction. Both the life-course analysis and the time-budget components of the research described in this book arose from the need to penetrate the character of gender-differentiated role sets in relation to the overall process of development.

So began the long search for a satisfactory theoretical framework and appropriate methodologies, for colleagues and research teams. The goals as the initiating group saw them were, first, to create models that would set new standards for gender sensitivity in all development research in the UNU, the entire United Nations system, and the academic community generally, and, second, to provide material that would change the way policy-makers approached development planning by providing a more realistic picture of the people and resources involved. In an ideal society, there would be a substantial overlap between male and female roles and real equality in decision-making in the household and the community. An important part of this study was to uncover actual patterns of participation and decision-making in the household.

In fact the practical goals of the project were quite modest, but they continued to focus on helping policy-makers. However, real life does not fall into neat categories, and the difficulties of international comparative research are enormous. The results are not earth-shattering, but they provide very substantial food for thought. What follows are my reflections, as an interested outsider who participated in the birth of the project, on the findings of the studies reported in this book.

Because modernization and development imply change, the reader will be expecting change. What is striking in reading these studies is the impression that although much of the edifice of development has been erected on the backs of women living at the lowest economic levels, these women themselves experience little change in their own lives, except for the worse.

The power of historical tradition, including the domination associated with patriarchy, appears again and again in these studies. In Kenya, the patriarchal inheritance and social system force dispossessed women and their dependants from their rural villages to the plantations, where the proportion of female-headed households is therefore above the national figure. The administrative staff there frankly admitted that these households provide the bulk of the stable labour force: men emigrate to the city, unwilling to accept the low pay, bad housing, and substandard working conditions. The women stay on, in desperation, in order to feed their children. In Sri Lanka, women who have the courage to migrate to the Middle East as domestic workers in order to help their families may

come home to find that husbands and kin have frittered away their hard-earned savings. There may be little left for the woman if she cannot control her own earnings. In China, too, though there are new job and income opportunities, women nevertheless feel that it is proper for men to decide what is to be done with family resources.

One constant in the lives of all these women is domination of men as fathers, husbands, employers, and authority figures in the community. This patriarchy is not linked to any particular political or economic form, nor to any specific social class. It persists in the great variety of national settings covered in these reports. Patriarchy may not be impermeable, but it is certainly highly resistant to the many factors of change operating in the societies studied. Internal, urban, and international migration changes the circumstances of women's lives drastically and requires new strategies and new skills, but male dominance in the household and at work remains untouched. Industrialization and technological change leave women trapped at the bottom of the skill ladder. Demographic transition may change the socio-economic profile of a country, but poor women, rural and urban alike, still have large families. Whether women are poor or rich, whatever autonomy they have operates within a patriarchal frame.

Many of the advances we associate with modernization – education, better jobs, fertility control – go primarily to middle- and upper-class women. The great difference between their experiences, on the one hand, and lower-class women on the other is particularly striking in the Colombian study, though it certainly pertains to the other countries too. Increased educational opportunities appear to benefit them more. They are of little use to poorer girls if they are kept at home to contribute to the family's subsistence, or “voluntarily” drop out of school because the pressure of domestic responsibilities is too great. On the other hand, the evidence from these studies is mixed, and it may be that better-educated women have fewer job opportunities. Both push and pull factors keep them at home in domestic roles instead, a phenomenon that has also been observed in Europe and North America in various phases of industrialization. The newly generated factory jobs for women, whether in Argentina or Sri Lanka, are not necessarily linked to educational levels and they may go to the less educated, least skilled women. The pay frequently keeps them close to, or even below, the subsistence level they were at before.

In situations of such complexity, the importance of cohort studies to reveal real changes in the lives of people over time cannot be overestimated. Each of these research projects identified women from two or sometimes three different birth cohorts or groups born at a certain time. The experiences of women now in their childbearing years are different to those their mothers had. While class differentiations are still strong, younger women as a group have a little more education, better family planning, and a greater variety of jobs than their mothers. They have lost their rural roots; they may not have extended families to fall back on; and they lack the wider experience of the hidden economy that rural women

traditionally have, but they are doing the best they can with what they have available.

The old story of women's double workload comes through in every study. By separating remunerated work from the home, modernization makes it more difficult to combine childbearing, child-rearing, and domestic maintenance with it. Since reproduction and domestic maintenance must continue in any case, employment outside the home frequently doubles the working hours of women. All the time-budget data in the studies show this. The little extra domestic labour contributed by men hardly makes a dent in that female burden. At least in the working classes, leisure is a male, not a female, phenomenon.

Women learn new skills. Whether in resettled villages or in migrant streams, by applying modern technologies or expanding craft opportunities, women are finding new ways to generate income. However, much of this activity is in the informal or hidden economy, so it is not reflected in official statistics. Nor do the economic rewards bear much relationship to the skill or ingenuity involved.

Many of the women in these studies have resettled in semi-urban or urban areas and so lost the support of extended family structures. This makes the double load doubly hard, since there are no reserves of help to cope with child care or illness and other misfortunes. Nor do the new channels of communication that are supposed to come with modernization work for them. There may be jobs, but they don't know how to find them. There may be services, but they don't know about them.

Women's horizons are widening, but some of the evidence may disappoint the idealists. Consumerism rears its unattractive head whenever there is cash beyond the subsistence level. There seems to be little interest in education for its own sake, school drop-out rates are high even in the absence of economic pressures, and the Chinese researchers are probably not the only ones who found that young literate women were reading romances, not newspapers. Yet it was heartening to find an interest in voluntary organizations and community issues among some Sri Lankan women. Perhaps further research might find more of this in the other countries studied.

I have already commented on the slowness of change in the lives of the women studied in contrast to the magnitude of the macro-level changes taking place in each society. In considering the future, it is very important to take account of the different stocks of knowledge available to older and younger women. For example, the traditional knowledge stock of rural societies, ranging from the use of plants, herbs, and healing practices to kitchen-gardening and food-processing and the production of tools and articles for household use, is not necessarily at the disposal of young urban women today. Nor are the community support systems of rural societies available to them. New knowledge stocks can grow up, as studies of urban kitchen-gardening in third-world cities show, and comparable mutual aid structures can also develop, but this takes time and energy that the hard-pressed urban poor may not have. If third-world societies are to develop

their full social and economic potential, attention must be paid to the maldistribution of resources that leaves women too exhausted and overworked to participate in shaping the conditions of their lives and the lives of their families and communities.

What are the needs that emerge from these studies? I would not put more formal education for women first, although that is important, as the results indicate that education relates only loosely to job opportunities. Rather, I would make improved wages and working conditions and the availability of child care a priority; then skill training, and community-based adult education activities along the lines of the Paolo Freire model of *conscientization*, which could help retrieve and adapt rural knowledge stocks to urban settings. It could also make women more aware of possibilities and of themselves as agents of change and co-shapers of their lives and their communities. Increased levels of formal education for women should be in addition to, not in place of, these other priorities. Additional schooling will only improve the quality of life of women and the societies they live in when basic standards of living are such that they are able to take advantage of it. While education is statistically associated with more effective family planning, it is not actually a prerequisite for fertility control. Throughout the ages, women without the benefit of literacy have controlled family size according to their perception of social needs.

The way different generations have managed to sustain and reproduce life under conditions of rapid social change compels our respect for the strength, versatility, and resourcefulness of women. These studies also reveal the pressures modernizing societies put on one institution – the household – and one gender – women. We now lament failed development. What has failed is a set of attitudes and structures built by men and maintained with the help of women, which prevent women from being equal partners in development. With more resources available to women, and a more equitable distribution of workloads between men and women, the development story would read very differently. While the failures have been more severe in the third world, the problems underlying them are to be found on all continents. The picture that emerges of women living at the poverty level in the countries in this project is not so different from that revealed in studies of low-income female-headed households in industrialized countries, like that recently carried out in Colorado, where I live.

More research is needed on the hidden needs of women and the hidden resources that women represent. We need more women and men planners and policy-makers sensitized to these resources and needs. The original goals of the Household, Gender, and Age Project will be fulfilled if further research takes gender into account and thus presents a more complete picture of what is happening to people as third-world countries struggle with development imbalances, and if international, national, and private-sector planners recognize gender differences in their programmes.

Of course, this project does not stand alone here. It was developed in co-

operation with the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW), and with the advice of women scholars in a number of countries who are working in complementary ways on the problems addressed here. Yet the growing number of non-governmental women's networks, United Nations special units, and government programmes focused on women in development have not yet had sufficient impact on mainstream research and planning.

The weight of history is against basic changes in the role and status of women and it will take unremitting efforts to integrate women more fully into decision-making everywhere. The researchers who conducted these studies were themselves subject to the pressure of inadequate resources, and are to be commended for having persevered under conditions that would have overcome less hardy students of society. The rigidity of formal academic requirements meant that some of the most talented local investigators were not eligible for training programmes designed to empower third-world women to conduct their own research. Each national research group worked as best it could within its particular constraints, with the resources at hand. The documentation they have produced on the life-course of the hundreds of women studied will have value far beyond the reports in this book. This study is just the beginning.

To all the women and men whose work has gone into the collection and processing of the data on which these reports are based, I say thank you! To all who read these reports I ask: what are the next steps?

ELISE BOULDING  
Dartmouth College Professor Emerita of Sociology  
1989

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