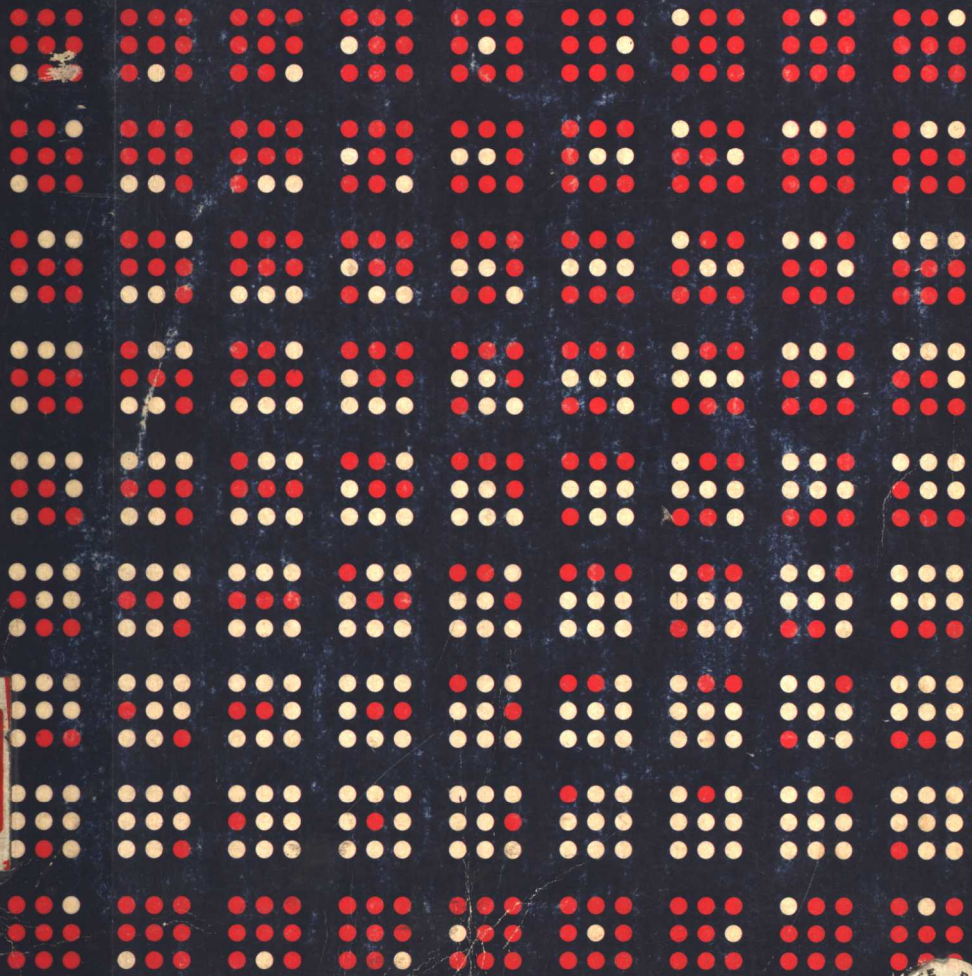
Women and National Development: The Complexities of Change

Edited by The Wellesley Editorial Committee



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The University of Chicago Press
Chicago and London

Based on a conference on women and development held June 2—6, 1976. Sponsored by the Center for Research on Women in Higher Education and the Professions, Wellesley College; the African Studies Association; the Association for Asian Studies; and the Latin American Studies Association. This volume originally appeared as the Autumn 1977 issue of *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (Volume 3, Number 1).

The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 60637
The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Main entry under title:

Women and national development.

"Based on a conference on women and development held June 2-6, 1976, sponsored by the Center for Research on Women in Higher Education and the Professions, Wellesley College; the African Studies Association; the Association for Asian Studies; and the Latin American Studies Association."
"Originally appeared as the Autumn 1977 issue of Signs, journal of women in culture and society (volume 3, number 1)."
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Underdeveloped areas—Women's employment—Congresses. 2. Underdeveloped areas—Economic policy—Congresses. 3. Women in community development—Congresses. 4. Women's rights—Congresses. I. Wellesley College. Center for Research on Women in Higher Education and the Professions.
HD6223.W65 331.4'09172'4 77-15038
ISBN 0-226-89314-6
ISBN 0-226-89315-4 pbk.

Foreword

On June 2–6, 1976, a conference on women and development was held at Wellesley College, coordinated by the Wellesley Center for Research on Women. Its purpose was to bring together people interested in the issues that women must confront in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East as their countries undergo profound social, economic, and cultural changes. Over 500 people attended. Eighty papers, organized into twenty panels, were given, and films were shown. In addition, several plenary sessions were held.

The sponsors of the conference, in addition to the Center, were the African Studies Association, the Association for Asian Studies, the Latin American Studies Association, and Wellesley College. Designing the conference was a program committee, its members drawn largely from the Committees on the Status of Women of the various area studies associations. They included Carolyn M. Elliott (convenor), Margaret Crahan, Nancy Hafkin, Margaret Jean Hay, Michelle McAlpin, Marysa Navarro, Hanna Papanek, Helen I. Safa, Ann Seidman, Annemarie Shimony, Roxane Witke, and Catherine Muther (conference coordinator).

Helping to underwrite the conference were a number of institutions: the conference sponsors themselves, the Agricultural Development Council, the Ford Foundation, the Johnson Foundation, the Lilly Endowment, the Pathfinder Fund, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Tinker Foundation, and the United States Agency for International Development. In addition, the Ford Foundation contributed to the cost of publication of the *Signs* issue.

Some months before the conference, the program committee arranged with *Signs* to publish selected papers, which were to be revised for a book edition. At the June meeting, an editorial committee was chosen, consisting of representatives from *Signs,* from the program committee, and from the regions represented at the conference. Its members were Ximena Bunster B., Carolyn M. Elliott, Michelle McAlpin (chair), Achola O. Pala, Hanna Papanek, Helen I. Safa, Catharine R. Stimpson, Niara Sudarkasa, and Roxane Witke. Mely Tan was also elected to the Editorial Committee but was unable to participate because of distance. This committee both finally conceptualized the volume and

chose the papers. It regretted that limitations of space and the demands of the volume as a whole kept it from publishing full proceedings.

The editors believe that the question of development, whether or not that term is entirely appropriate, is of extraordinary importance, concerning, as it does, the structure and substance of life of much of the world's population. Moreover, the changes that development demands are complex, subject neither to easy analysis nor to quick judgment. For these reasons, this volume is dedicated wholly to material that the Wellesley conference both presented and provoked.

MICHELLE MCALPIN, *Chair, Wellesley Editorial Committee*

CATHARINE R. STIMPSON, *Editor, Signs*

DOMNA C. STANTON, *Associate Editor, Signs*
(International Contributions)

Preface

Ester Boserup

In recent years numerous research projects, conferences, and seminars have been devoted to the theme "Women and Development." This is no wonder, for the theme lies at the juncture of two major streams of present-day social research: women's condition and economic development. Moreover, the increasing number of local studies on women in Third World countries has revealed their lot in the labor market, especially in rural areas, to be peculiar; on one hand, women are overburdened with work, and on the other, their efforts partly go to waste, because they have even less training and use even more primitive equipment than the male labor force in their communities. Hence, there is need for additional research that aims to improve the working conditions of Third World women, including domestic work, and to provide them with better access to the labor market.

A frequent objection to studies of "Women and Development" is that their emphasis on labor market problems and labor productivity is unwarranted. Many studies of women in Third World countries show their social status to be low where they are actively engaged in agriculture, crafts, trade, or construction, and where they support themselves and their children by such work. Therefore, or so the argument continues, the study of women's status, especially their status in relation to male family members, should have priority over labor market studies. However, in these Third World communities female subservience to male relatives derives from legal or customary rules which women are unable or disinclined to change. Thus, economic self-support coexists with low family status. But in societies of another type, where women are legally independent, opportunities for economic self-support are of crucial importance to actual female status in relation to male relatives. In recent decades, many Third World countries have made important changes in women's legal status. For example, women have obtained the right to divorce and to guardianship of themselves and their children in case of

divorce and widowhood. But, apparently, these achievements in the legal sphere have made little change in the real family status of women, unless opportunities for economic self-support in case of divorce or widowhood also existed.

Economic change is also occurring in most Third World countries. This change, however, is making it less and less feasible for women, even for those who live in rural areas, to support themselves and their children by means of subsistence activities. If women have no opportunity to earn money incomes, their dependence upon male relatives will increase with divorce and widowhood and their family status may deteriorate in spite of legal independence. By contrast, where legal independence and opportunities for earning money incomes go hand in hand, the family status of women who do not divorce or leave the family in case of widowhood is also likely to improve because male relatives will treat them better knowing that they have an alternative to staying with them. Therefore, it is pointless to argue whether priority in research concerning Third World women should be given to studies of family status or to studies of labor market conditions. Both are indispensable.

Research on women and development must be integrated with studies of the development process itself. Studies of this process undertaken in various parts of the world have shown that certain groups may reap a disproportionate share of the benefits of development, while other groups may become victims of development, because the products they were selling or the services they were performing are replaced by new and more productive activities. Although both men and women may become victims of development, it is more difficult for women to adapt to new conditions, because (1) family obligations make them less mobile than men, (2) their occupational choice is more narrowly limited by custom, (3) they usually have less education and training, and (4) even without these handicaps they often face sex discrimination in recruitment. Moreover, in Third World countries, a much larger percentage of the female than of the male labor force is engaged in traditional occupations, which are precisely those gradually replaced by modern enterprises in economic development.

It is likely, then, that large numbers of women in developing countries will be victims of development. Some research projects on women and development have already revealed unexpected side effects of technological change for rural women and their local income opportunities. Research must be undertaken to foresee such cases and explore possibilities of creating alternative income opportunities. Because of the speed of technological change in many developing countries, we must train both women and men, not for the labor market structure of today, but of tomorrow.

There are striking contrasts between the speed of economic growth

and modernization in different developing countries, and most generalizations about the current process of change are misleading. In any given country or region, the possibilities for improving women's income-earning opportunities are of course related to differences in natural resources, the stock of human and physical capital, foreign relations, and government policies. In countries where economic growth is swift and labor shortages appear, attitudes toward women's work outside the home are also swiftly changing, and part of the female labor reserve is pulled into the labor market. By contrast, in countries where population growth is rapid and growth of the economy is slow, women from poor families are pushed into already crowded occupations, such as market trade and domestic service, to help to support their large families. In both cases, research aimed at helping women adapt to and improve their status must be based on solid investigation of economic conditions and other factors in the countries in which those women are living. Application of overall "development models," either "western" or "alternative," makes little sense when economic conditions, institutional patterns, and attitudes to women's work vary so widely.

Many of the features which accompany the development process, especially rural modernization and rural-urban migration, are likely to result in the modification of cultural attitudes and the abandonment of traditional marriage systems and other customs. However, with the notable exception of fertility and attitudes to birth control, few systematic studies have been undertaken of the interrelationship between technological, demographic, and cultural changes affecting women. Studies of the effects of development on aspects of women's lives and status other than childbirth are needed. Indeed, a broader attitude to research in this field is required.

Many look to development as a means of undermining customs and of changing cultural attitudes which they consider unfavorable to women. Others, women as well as men, fear the possible effects of development in the cultural field. Factual research which aims to sort out the various effects on women of traditional culture and customs may help throw more light on these controversial and highly emotional problems and may be a useful supplement to the studies of the effects of development on such institutions.

Solid national and local studies are indispensable, because economic conditions and cultural attitudes vary so widely among countries and even among local communities within the same country. At the same time, knowledge that is useful to women in other countries—and to development policies in other countries—risks getting lost unless national and local studies are made available internationally. Likewise, there is a very real need for coordination in planning and carrying out research. International conferences and seminars on the theme of

women and development, like the ones in Wellesley and Wingspread,[1] have a crucial role to play, not only as inspiration for individual scholars, but also as a stimulus for international exchange and coordination of research.

Charlottenlund, Denmark

1. This was a follow-up conference held at Wingspread Conference Center, Racine, Wisconsin, U.S.A. Sixty-three participants, the majority from overseas, discussed research needs in their countries and the possibility of cooperation among them. *Women and Development,* a report of the conference, may be obtained from the Johnson Foundation, Racine, Wisconsin 53401, U.S.A.

Contents

Theories of Development: An Assessment

Carolyn M. Elliott

Critics of women's secondary status in modern society have traced the subordination of women to the beginning of history and culture. Now students of development are demonstrating that the position of women has not significantly improved as their societies have incorporated modern technology and organization. Indeed, women may be worse off in important ways because the benefits of modernization have accrued mainly to the male half of society. The papers in this volume seek to document and explain women's position in national development by close examination of evidence from one or more cases. They raise questions that show the need for new theories, methodologies, and research. However, they also draw from several intellectual traditions, and in order to assess them it is useful to point out their informing perspectives. They are: (1) cultural dualism, which Simone deBeauvoir utilized to examine the position of women; (2) social evolutionary thought, which generated both modernization theory and the Marxist analysis of stages in the development of capitalism; (3) developmentalism, which identified obstacles to women's participation in national development; and (4) dependency theory, which also analyzed the logic of capitalist growth.

Cultural Dualism

A perception of the universality of woman's secondary status has propelled many students of culture to look for explanations in panCultural facts of human existence. One such student is Simone de

Beauvoir.[1] She locates the origins of woman's subordination, in part, in her relationship to nature and nature's relationship to culture. She finds in the concept of humanity a universal opposition between nature and culture. Human beings are distinguished from animals by their efforts to transcend the limitations of perishable nature through culture. Man is freer than woman to pursue transcendence because he is not constrained by the tasks of reproducing and sustaining life. Yet man cannot live without woman, just as he cannot abolish nature, which includes and contains sexuality. Knowing this, man's attitude toward woman is deeply ambivalent. He at once celebrates her and denigrates her. He does not dare to bind her to the extent of endangering her creativity, but he wishes to control her. Susan Wadley's paper argues that this ambivalence permeates Hindu culture.

There are, however, cultures where women play the dominant role in regulating nature and sexual behavior. Among the Sande of Sierra Leone, according to Carol MacCormack's essay, women bear the major responsibility for restricting sexual intercourse to sanctioned places, times, and partners. MacCormack's analysis utilizes Lévi-Strauss's notion of the opposition between nature and culture but argues against the necessary identification of women with the sphere of nature.

In assessing dualistic theories, it must be acknowledged that there do appear to be certain commonalities in the social and cultural position of women across virtually all known societies, based primarily on the continuing sexual division of labor. Anthropologists have found no society, of foragers or of industrial giants, in which women play a major role in warfare or formal religion. Students of development can find little guidance from dualistic theories, however, because they give no attention to variations in these purportedly fundamental patterns of human existence, nor are they concerned with change.

Social Evolutionary Theory

The question—is women's position becoming better or worse as societies change—animates those who draw from social evolutionary theory to study women's roles. It provides them with an explanation of the dynamic producing social change and an evaluation of its direction. The notion of social evolution perceives societies as propelled by changes in the population/resource balance and competition with neighbors to move along a scale of increasing division of labor and differentiation.[2] Those in which the same persons or institutions do a

1. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1952).

2. For an example of this perspective, see Talcott Parsons, *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966); see also Gerhard Lenski, *Human Societies: A Macro-Level Introduction to Sociology* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1970).

multitude of tasks are at one end of a continuum, in the category of simple societies; those in which social units specialize in only a few tasks are at the other, in the category of complex societies. Higher levels of technology and more formal institutions, as well as greater occupational specialization, characterize complex societies. That this best describes Western society is no accident, for social evolutionists took the West as their measure of progress.

By drawing on the notion of division of labor, social evolutionary theory provides an explanation for inequality, both among and within societies. With specialization, each laboring group becomes more efficient, and overall productivity increases. Generally, societies seeking a higher level of productivity move toward greater specialization. Therefore, simple societies, with less differentiation among social units, are less productive and poorer. Within complex societies, those groups who perform less specialized roles are less productive. This explanation of inequality has been the premise for much stimulating work on sexual inequality, particularly among economists. Accepting the linkage between specialization, technology, and rewards, Ester Boserup demonstrates that women have been relegated to jobs in the backward sectors of the economy. Because they fall on the lower side of the "productivity gap" they suffer inequality.[3] The same analysis has been made about the effect of social differentiation on political participation. As differentiation increased the distance between domestic and public arenas, women were relegated to the more particularistic concerns of domestic life and lost the opportunity to participate in community-wide decisions. The growth of the specialized state, with its professional armies and bureaucracies, enhanced their subordination.

Providing empirical documentation for the long-range societal change contemplated in evolutionary theory is exceedingly difficult. Most studies drawing on an evolutionary model array a number of disparate contemporaneous societies along a scale of complexity and infer a process of movement along the scale. Utilizing the wide range of communities in Turkey, however, Deniz Kandiyoti has been able to trace the dynamic impact of increasing social complexity on women's roles. Remi Clignet shows how colonialism in West Africa created a more complex society with greater sex-role segregation.

Historically, social evolutionary theory has generated several variants which have significantly informed studies of women and development. Both modernization theory and Marxism draw from the pool of evolutionary notions, though in quite different ways.[4] Criticisms of these

3. Ester Boserup, *Woman's Role in Economic Development* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1970).

4. For a statement of how modernization will break down all ascriptive criteria, including the assignment of roles by sex, see S. N. Eisenstadt, "Modernization: Growth and Diversity," in *Tradition, Change and Modernity* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1973), pp. 22–46.

schools, which are widespread, have in turn yielded revisions which now stand at the forefront of theory on women and development.[5] I will turn first to the work of developmentalists and then to the dependency theorists, both of whom are represented in this volume.

Developmentalism

Perception that modernization has had differential effects on men and women has led planners to seek to describe the obstacles preventing women from participating in development. The 1975 United Nations conference in Mexico City focused worldwide attention on the need for "intensified action to ensure the full integration of women in the development process."[6] Implicit in the UN call and the developmentalist perspective are three notions about social change that differ from the assumptions of modernization theory. (1) Society is not seen as a single organic unit such that changes in one sector will generate compatible changes throughout. New technologies introduced to raise productivity may remain encapsulated, just as development programs addressed to men often fail to spin off benefits for women. (2) There are contradictions in the process of social change. Policies to increase women's employment may only increase exploitation if wages and working conditions are not improved at the same time. (3) External forces and national leaders play a key role in producing social change. Because developmentalists do not see a pervasive internal dynamic carrying societies toward modernization, they look for conscious policies to move them in desirable directions. Pnina Lahav considers the effectiveness of law as an instrument of change in family relations. Her paper is a model for analyzing how existing institutions (e.g., religious courts) modify policy initiatives and constrain the implementation of a law.

Failure of implementation has led revisionist developmentalists to consider decision making by individuals as well as governments. They point out that few development decisions are implemented by direct intervention. Most are enacted by altering the structure of situations in which individuals make decisions. Therefore, they examine how price supports affect farmers' decisions to invest in new technology, for example, or how work opportunities affect women's decisions to have children. Mary Chamie extends the analyses of the context of decision making on fertility into a new arena. She examines how patterns of com-

5. June Nash's essay discussing the political implications of modernization theory shows why Third World women are so hostile to it (see "A Critique of Social Science Roles in Latin America," in *Sex and Class in Latin America,* ed. June Nash and Helen Safa [New York: Praeger Publishers, 1976], pp. 1–2).

6. Point 14 of the introduction to the "Report of the World Conference of the International Women's Year" (Mexico City, June 19–July 2, 1975), UN Publication Sales no. E. 76. IV. 1 (New York: United Nations, 1976), pp. 9–43.

munication between sexual partners about coitus affect women's decisions on contraception.

By looking at women as rational decision makers, and not simply conservative holdouts from change, developmentalist studies of women have identified many previously ignored reasons for development failures. They have also generated a critique of the entire conception of development in the 1950s and 1960s. They argue that concentration on increasing the value of the GNP, an aggregate measure of marketable goods and services, undervalues the full production of a society and ignores the question of distribution. Neglect of nonmarket work done in households, subsistence agriculture, and the informal labor market, all done by women more often than men, has led to policies which impede its productivity. Little is invested in upgrading nonmarket work, and the costs of the incursions of the market are ignored. Women suffer an increasing narrowing of social roles and capacity to generate income. Society also suffers by losing the household as an adaptive low-cost productive center which can shield its members from the vicissitudes of the market economy.[7] Expanding the definition of the GNP to include women's work is a strategy proposed by Ester Boserup and others to include assessment of their costs in the formation of development goals.

Unfortunately, much of the developmentalist literature disembodies information and attitudes from economic structure and power relationships. It rests on the assumption that more enlightened planning will remove the obstacles to women's participation. If false views are exposed, new statistics gathered, and better arguments devised, development can benefit women. One must question, however, whether the obstacles to "including women in development" are not greater than these planners recognize. Furthermore, the survey of women's attitudes which provides the basis for many social education and training programs must be questioned. Too many studies have located women's perceived passivity and resistance to change in female nature instead of examining how their life experience in positions of powerlessness may have made them distrust new initiatives.[8]

Dependency Theory

Dissatisfaction with the capacity of modernization theory to explain continued poverty and backwardness in Third World countries led some observers to look for systemic connections among the contradictions

7. Nash.

8. Many studies of modernization are constructed on the assumption that women are resistant to change and take men's attitudes as the measure of social change. Alex Inkeles surveyed male factory workers in six nations to study modernization but did not consider women (Alex Inkeles and David H. Smith, *Becoming Modern: Individual Change in Six Developing Countries* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974]).