WOMAN'S ROLE IN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Ester Boserup

New Introduction by
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Introduction: Boserup Revisited

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INTRODUCTION

Ester Boserup's work on *Woman's Role in Economic Development*, first published in 1970, was pioneering. She drew attention to women's contribution to agricultural and industrial development, and highlighted the way in which development policies and processes, from colonial times onwards, had been biased against women. Her work inspired the UN Decade for Women (1976–1986) and heralded an era of research and enquiry on gender issues. An important feature of her work was its strong empirical grounding, providing data and hard evidence of women's contributions to agriculture and industry. Even if processes of economic development have not evolved exactly as Boserup predicted, her ideas and insights, particularly on the gender division of labour and what motivates actors in development, are still very relevant. Her analysis signalled many trends for women's participation in development, some of which have turned out to be alarmingly accurate. Of course, there are forces which she could not have foreseen, such as some impacts of globalization, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and the challenges we face as a result of climate change.

It is difficult to do justice to all the ideas contained in Boserup's work. In this introduction we highlight some of the areas where Boserup correctly predicted the trends and some where the picture has become more complex. It is important to bear in mind that Boserup's analysis was couched in the then prevalent development paradigm of 'modernization'. In this model, development is the transition through specific stages from primitive agricultural communities to modern industrial societies. As Boserup explains:

> *... two successive steps in economic development can be seen; in the first step, subsistence activities for family use are replaced by commercial production for sale, and small scale market trade and services. In the second step, this type of activity is replaced by employment in modern factories, offices, modern shops and modern service industries* (p. 166).

Rather than this linear progression of economic development, in practice we have witnessed a more complex picture of uneven growth and increasing inequalities. Given that development is a more complex issue than Boserup predicted, some of her work appears over-simplified and her use of typologies to describe the role of different actors is perhaps not refined enough for analysis today. For example, her use of broad categories such as male/female farming systems raised many important issues, but our current understanding of people's complex livelihoods strategies draws attention to their limitations.

Nevertheless, Boserup was also remarkably prescient. Through her analysis of land rights in Chapter 3 on the loss of status under European Rule, she accurately foresaw that "When sales of land increase women are at a disadvantage, because they usually cultivate subsistence crops for the family, while men cultivate cash crops or work for a wage. Therefore, it is the men who have money and can purchase land. Thus the possession of land is likely to pass gradually from women to men, even in tribes where women have the right to inherit land" (p. 47). Such widespread trends of women losing access to land have been documented, an example being a recent study in southern Niger (Doka and Monimart, 2004).

She also analysed the origins of prejudices about women farmers. The idea that men are better farmers is traced to colonial ideals, with the corollary that since men play the main role in economic development, they should, therefore, be the beneficiaries of education, training and technology. These biases and prejudices persist. However, Boserup did not view women as passive victims; Chapter 3, the section on the Revolt of Women, describes African women's protests against the deterioration of

their position and their loss of land as a result of colonial rule. Later in this Introduction we look at more recent examples of women's resistance, organization and opposition to gender inequities.

Boserup analysed women's roles in the village (Part 1 on Agriculture) and in the town (Part 2 on Industry), as well as associated issues of migration from villages to towns and the design of female education (Part 3). The rest of this Introduction is structured as follows: first, we look at globalization, market-oriented growth and women's employment as it relates to Boserup's work; second, we provide a very brief overview of HIV/AIDS and climate change and their implications for women, two major current issues that Boserup could not have foreseen. Finally, we discuss women's agency and organization, which Boserup touched upon but which have been further developed since the book was written.

GLOBALIZATION, MARKET ORIENTED GROWTH AND WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT

Boserup's model of economic development assumed that it would eventually lead to poverty reduction as economic prosperity trickled down to the poor. The current context, characterized by liberalization and market oriented growth, has shown us a more complex picture. After almost twenty years of liberalization, there is sufficient and growing evidence that these processes, have resulted in greater inequalities in income and assets between and within countries (see, for example, Cagatay, 2000, special issue of *World Development*). It is difficult to arrive at general statements about the specific effects of liberalisation and market orientation on women. But the 'feminization of the labour force' and the 'feminization of poverty' are emerging as common themes in discussions of the ways in which global economic changes and market-led growth have impacted on women.

THE FEMINIZATION OF LABOUR

This feminization of the labour force is slightly contrary to Boserup's analysis, which suggested that when larger global

Table 1

INFORMAL EMPLOYMENT IN NON-AGRICULTURAL EMPLOYMENT, BY SEX, IN DIFFERENT REGIONS AND SELECTED COUNTRIES (1994–2000)

Region/ country	Informal employment as percentage of non-agricultural employment	Women's informal employment as percentage of women's non-agricultural employment	Men's information employment as percentage of men's non-agricultural employment
North Africa	**48**	**43**	**49**
Algeria	43	41	43
Egypt	55	46	57
Sub-Saharan Africa	**72**	**84**	**63**
Chad	74	95	60
Kenya	72	83	59
South Africa	51	58	44
Latin America	**51**	**58**	**48**
Bolivia	63	74	55
Brazil	60	67	55
Chile	36	44	31
El Salvador	57	69	46
Mexico	55	55	54
Asia	**65**	**65**	**65**
India	83	86	83
Indonesia	78	77	78
Thailand	51	54	49
Syrian Arab Republic	42	35	43

Source: *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture*. ILO, Geneva, 2002

industries gradually drive home industries out of business, women would lose their jobs (p. 99). She described a world where women's participation in the industrial labour force was declining. In India in 1927 the percentage of women among factory workers was 17 per cent while in 1970 it was 11 per cent. Although history has not witnessed a continued decline, Boserup was accurate about women's position in industry. "If women are hired at all in the modern sector it is usually for the unskilled, low wage jobs"

(p. 127). This phenomenon persists and has serious implications given women's generally high level of participation in the labour force.

The term 'feminization of labour' is used in two ways. Firstly, it is used to refer to the rapid and substantial increase in the proportion of women in paid work over the last two decades. At the global level, about 70 per cent in the 20–54 age group are members of the paid workforce. In developing countries as a group, the figure is lower at 60 per cent (United Nations, 1999). These figures do not capture women's participation in rural and urban informal sectors in developing countries which is usually less visible and therefore undercounted. However, as the figures in Table 1 demonstrate, this low wage informal sector continues to be an important employer of poor women in developing and transition countries (ILO, 2002). The trend in the feminization of labour has been accompanied by a shift in employment from manufacturing to services in developed countries, and from agriculture to manufacturing and services in developing countries.

With the exception of Africa, women's employment has grown substantially faster than men's since 1980. With a stagnating (or slightly decreasing) male labour force participation rate, the difference between male and female participation rates has shrunk considerably in many regions (UNRISD, 2004).

The term 'feminization of labour' is also used to describe the increased flexibility demanded from both male and female labour, a fallout of the changing nature of employment where irregular conditions, once thought to be the hallmark of women's 'secondary' employment, have become widespread for both sexes. Informal activities, subcontracting, part-time work and home-based work have proliferated while rates of unionization have declined (Standing, 1999; UNRISD, 2004). In the South in particular, standard labour legislation has applied to fewer workers, because governments either have not enforced it or have abolished it outright, or because existing legislation is weak and enterprises have been able to circumvent it. But stronger legislation is not enough. The advocacy of some international organizations for the implementation of labour standards legislation will only help workers if it comes with policies, such

as competition policy, which compel firms in the North to address the impact of their own purchasing practices on labour standards elsewhere in the supply chain.

THE FEMINIZATION OF LABOUR: INDUSTRY

Where poor countries have achieved an expansion of non-commodity exports, there has been relative growth in female-intensive sectors of industry. The lower the income level of the economy, and/or the greater the concentration of clothing production and electronics assembly in export production, the greater the employment creating effects of trade have been for women (Fontana et al, 1998, p. 47). Sub-contracting and supply links between formal sector enterprises and small workshops are widespread, indicating an even higher increase in informal jobs.

In parts of the Caribbean, Central America, south and south-east Asia, light industry export-processing zones have employed a labour force that is overwhelmingly young and female. There is considerable debate on the effects of pay and conditions on women's livelihoods and well-being, particularly in the longer term. Some researchers have argued that the overall effect for women is positive, given the choices they face in their own contexts. They contend that earning a wage increases women's bargaining power and 'status' within their households as well as providing resources to meet household needs (see, for example Lim, 1990). Kabeer (2000, 2004) in her investigation of women garment workers in Bangladesh argues that women have moved from the margins of the labour market to a more central, better paid and more visible place in the economy.

Other researchers have emphasized the poor wages and working conditions, the precariousness of the work and the fact that mainly younger women without children are given these opportunities (Elson and Pearson, 1981; Pearson, 1998). The longer-term benefits for women are even less clear. Women may become locked into relatively low levels of pay and skills in the export sector, increasing discrimination as export production is diversified and mechanized.

Finally, while the analysis of women's role in export industry is important, we must remember that local and regional markets are

more vital for local livelihoods, particularly for women, despite being given less attention in policy discourse.

THE FEMINIZATION OF LABOUR: AGRICULTURE

Boserup foresaw women's increased participation in the agricultural labour force. "Owing to the rapid rise of population in developing countries, combined with a shortage of capital, many countries will probably be unable to solve their agricultural problems exclusively by means of capital intensive techniques and, therefore, the total demand for female labour is likely to increase" (p. 68). Her analysis focused on plantations. These were the main producers of crops for export at the time, with high levels of women workers in Asia, while work in Africa was mainly reserved for young unmarried men. In fact, the actual effects of trade liberalization on agriculture in the South have not strayed far from Boserup's analysis although levels of women's participation in the African agricultural labour force are probably even higher than she thought probable.

In 'non-traditional' horticultural exports, low-paid seasonal female labour has had a crucial role in many countries in the South. When compared to industry, agriculture, particularly horticulture, involves higher levels of risk and greater flexibility if a consistent global supply network for fresh produce is to be maintained. The supply chain is organized in such a way that risk is off-set by the more powerful players at the distribution end and transferred onto the more fragmented and heterogeneous producers operating in diverse locations to supply this fresh produce. As Barrientos et al (2001) argue, it is flexible seasonal employment, particularly that of women, which provides producers with a buffer against risk and allows them to minimize the cost of employment within this highly seasonal sector.

Agro-industries, such as fruit and vegetable exports, are sometimes seen by policy makers as a means to absorb dislocated labour from peasant agriculture and replace 'inefficient' peasant food production with cheaper imports (Razavi, 2002). However, both international factors and competition in this sector, as well as household level factors including who controls wages earned from agro-industry employment, will affect household food

security with direct impacts on the situation of women and children.

In parts of Asia and Central America, there has been a huge expansion in aquaculture since the mid-1980s. Large tracts of land, as well as mangrove forests in coastal Asia have been taken over for shrimp farms, which export to Europe and the US. The high cost of these operations for local populations and the environment has been documented (Wichterich, 2000). While poor and landless families may gain from wage labour on shrimp farms, land for local food production has been taken away, soil salinity has increased, food crop yields have declined and the availability of cheap fish for low-income consumers has declined, since these are now required as aquaculture feed.

In Africa, studies of women's growing involvement in cash crops over decades have shown that their time for food production and preparation is negatively affected. As Wichterich (2000, p. 72) puts it, "The market is occupying the most fertile land, as subsistence production moves out to the margins.... Less and less of agriculture serves to feed the local people themselves." Inequitable gender relations and women's insecure rights to land exclude them from participation in decision making over land and natural resource use in many parts of the world. Yet, women continue to bear the major responsibility for household food security and management of natural resources. Their perspectives, although critical to planning for food security, are not reflected at policy level.

Boserup understood the multiple roles that women have to play. In her analysis of women's participation in the agricultural labour force, she observed that Asian women work on plantations, while in Africa women stay in the villages. In both cases, however, she acknowledged that the ways of holding down labour costs in the export sector are at the expense of women. Women working on Asian plantations have a double job, as housewives and as full-time labourers at least for a large part of the year, while African women, in addition to housework, must do double the amount of agricultural work when the younger men are away working in plantations or mines (p. 78).

SOCIAL EFFECTS OF ECONOMIC ADJUSTMENT

The withdrawal of the state from direct roles in social and economic development in the late 1980s, led to what UNICEF claimed was "a lost decade for development" (Cornia et al, 1987). There has been considerable empirical work on the gendered effects of economic adjustment policies, particularly in Africa and Latin America (see for example, Elson, 1995; Kanji, 1995; Moser, 1996). Women's increased involvement in paid work has not significantly reduced their share of unpaid work in caring for household members. Decreased provision of basic and social services by the state has shifted the costs of such social reproduction to households, with women bearing a greater burden than men. The existence of social support structures for children and other vulnerable groups affects the extent to which women can participate in the labour market. When women work for meagre incomes, girls may be taken out of school to help with household work, decreasing their opportunities to acquire marketable skills and increasing their chances of being poor in the future. There is now considerable awareness of this set of issues, but a lack of commensurate policy and action, particularly in areas affected by HIV/AIDS where the problem is exacerbated.

MIGRATION

In Part 3 of her book Boserup talked about migration in terms of the rural-urban movement of women relocating to cities with their families, but we have seen male and female migration on a larger scale. The gender implications of migration vary according to context. In some cases the migration of men opens up spaces for women. For example, it may increase their access to land in rural areas, but often without control and decision making power over how the land is used and what is done with the harvest. Today nearly half of all international migrants are women and their numbers are increasing. Women from all walks of life (poor, highly skilled, married, single) are migrating to find work and better opportunities for themselves and their families. Domestic work is one of the largest sectors driving international female labour migration, reflecting gender stereotypes and women's limited options for employment.

The migration of men to urban centres in search of work has in some places led to the 'feminization of agriculture' when women are left in the villages to continue farming and looking after the family. Whether this has positive or negative implications for women depends on whether, in addition to responsibility for farming, they also acquire decision making power and control over the resources they need (land, water, etc).

While the migration of men affects women's roles and responsibilities, women themselves often migrate. On average these women earn less than men and therefore the amount of money they send home is less, but they send home a greater proportion of their wages. Women's remittances are usually used for daily needs, health care or education, while that of men tends to be spent on consumer items (cars, TVs, etc), and investments (property and livestock). While migration may reflect gender inequities in terms of the opportunities available, wages earned and women's vulnerability to exploitation and violence, it can also open up spaces for change. When a male head of household migrates abroad, some women gain a greater say in how household funds are used. Migrant women who send money also transmit a new idea of what it means to be female and can affect how families and communities view women. Women living abroad often acquire attitudes, opinions and knowledge that can lead to enhanced family health and welfare in the home country (UNFPA, 2006). Therefore, although Boserup did address issues related to migration, there have been far greater changes in the scale (both in numbers and geographical spread) and movement of people in search of work, than she foresaw.

We can see, therefore, that globalization, liberalization and market-oriented growth have had a wide range of effects on women's income and employment. In both agriculture and industry, there has been an increase in women's participation in the formal and informal sectors. Structural adjustment, the withdrawal of the state and its reduced role in providing social services, have had a particularly detrimental effect on women's lives as they shoulder the burden of providing these services. Finally, migration has important implications (both positive and negative) for both the women who migrate in search of jobs and

those who stay home. Boserup's work addressed women's participation in agriculture, industry and migration, providing relevant insight and analysis. The following sections, however, look at developments she could not have predicted.

HIV/AIDS AND CLIMATE CHANGE

HIV/AIDS

The HIV/AIDS pandemic has critical implications for women's welfare and their role in economic development. Over 17 million women in the world face the triple challenge of poverty, gender inequities and living with HIV/AIDS. Of particular concern is the dramatic increase in HIV infection rates among young women. They now make up over 60 per cent of 15–24 year olds living with HIV/AIDS and, globally, young women are 1·6 times more likely to be living with HIV/AIDS than their male peers (UNAIDS/UNFPA/UNIFEM, 2004).

Responsibility for caring for the sick generally falls to women, especially grandmothers. Young girls are more likely to be taken out of school to help with domestic chores and look after patients. Women have the double burden of caring for sick family members while also having to grow subsistence crops to feed dependants at a time when household labour supply is reduced. These extra responsibilities have implications for women's economic activities, livelihoods and well-being. Poverty reduction strategies and national AIDS plans seldom take into account the heavy burden of care giving by women; it remains unpaid and therefore undervalued in economic terms.

When women become infected or fall ill they often face barriers to treatment. Lower incomes mean that women have more difficulty in paying for treatment than men. And where money is limited, a family's preference may be given to medication for men. For example, if a husband and wife are both infected, preference may be given to the husband. If he dies the wife will lose access to land and will not be able to support the children while the husband retains land and property if she dies. Restrictions on mobility may also constrain a woman's ability to

access treatment, if she is not able to travel unaccompanied. Finally, social stigma and the popular belief that infection is linked to promiscuity may make it more difficult for women to seek treatment (UNAIDS/UNFPA/UNIFEM, 2004).

The example given above illustrates the importance of land rights and women's insecurity in this regard. In developing countries, women's access and use rights to land are generally limited and negotiated through customary systems that are often characterized by gender inequities. In research and policy debate there is no clear consensus on how best to secure women's land rights and interests within customary systems which are premised on a form of social organization that no longer exists (i.e. stable, locally rooted, pre-AIDS, largely self-sufficient, patrilineal households and clans) (Walker, 2004). Furthermore, with population pressures, cultural change, agricultural intensification and commercialization, many customary systems have evolved towards greater individualization, extending the land rights invested in male household heads and further eroding women's secondary rights (Cotula et al, 2006). The advent of HIV/AIDS, therefore, underlines existing gender inequities in terms of women's land rights.

Another challenge posed by HIV/AIDS is that of stopping its spread. Migration and movement of people for work are important means of transmission and have major gendered aspects. Migration for work (such as for those who leave family units to work in factories, mines, or domestic service) or the obligation to travel regularly with long periods away from spouses and partners (such as for transport workers, armed forces, or long distance traders) exposes both men and women to HIV risk if other sexual partners are taken and sexual networks extended. Domestic workers are frequently at risk from sexual coercion by employers or other household members, and isolated from support and information networks. Sex workers are also obviously at greater risk from sexually transmitted infections and HIV.

This brief overview cannot do justice to the work, documentation and research which exist on HIV/AIDS. This literature recognizes the gendered aspects of transmission, treatment and patient care. But the effects of HIV/AIDS are bound

up with larger gender inequities around rights over land and resources, and the division of labour. Responding to these challenges through policy and action is not an easy task.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Another factor that is likely to influence all aspects of development is climate change, one of the real uncertainties of our time. While there is agreement that the climate is changing, there seems to be little certainty about what this means for different regions. Will there be more or less rainfall? How high will temperatures and sea levels rise? These questions do not have clear answers, since they also depend on how effectively we cut back on greenhouse gas emissions.

The two main policy responses to climate change are mitigation (reducing the levels of greenhouse gas through reducing emissions and taking carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere) and adaptation (the ability to alter livelihood activities in response to the impacts of climate change). But little work has been done to analyse these initiatives in the light of gender inequities.

ADAPTATION

Vulnerability to climate change and the ability to adapt are in part social issues. It is therefore surprising that gender has not played a more important role in the development of adaptation initiatives. Gender is an important factor that defines one's ability to adapt to climate change because being male or female has bearing on levels of income, access to resources, roles and responsibilities. For example, in developing countries, women are generally responsible for collecting fuel wood and water. Deforestation and reduced rainfall as a result of climate change mean that they will have to travel further to find these resources.

MITIGATION

The technological changes and instruments that are being proposed to reduce the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere are presented as gender neutral. For example, the ability of tropical forests to absorb carbon dioxide through

photosynthesis has led to the development of carbon mitigation projects through sustainable forest management, conservation of forests or planting trees.

Emily Boyd's 2002 analysis of the Noel Kempff Climate Action Project in Bolivia shows how the benefits coming from these projects were not necessarily shared evenly between men and women. This project, established in 1996, focused on land-use change and forestry in order to:

- reduce carbon dioxide emissions and improve biodiversity;
- contribute to achieving sustainable development objectives through locally focused project activities.

Boyd explains that the forestry programme provided short-term employment for between thirty and fifty men from local villages, to establish forest inventories and plant nurseries. A small number of women were employed to cook for the forestry workers. Although the work provided much-needed income and status to some community members, the majority of women did not benefit directly. She also found inequalities in decision making powers. The project directors were men who were overseen by male government technicians based in La Paz. At the local level, the project reinforced the power of traditional councils by entrusting them with land titling processes. These were all-male councils, with no guarantee that they could represent women's interests.

Women were involved in some project activities but these were in line with existing divisions of labour and power structures. Women generally spent their time in the fields harvesting maize or rice, collecting firewood and medicinal plants and growing fruit trees and vegetables in their homesteads. Neither in the context of the project, nor at community meetings, was there any focus on the socio-political and economic roles of women in decision making, or their relationship with their environment. This project had clearly failed to address gender inequities in its design.

Because they affect people's livelihoods, mitigation and adaptation initiatives will inevitably affect men and women

differently. Research, policy and action to date have not taken this sufficiently into account and it remains an area for work by researchers, decision makers and practitioners alike.

WOMEN'S AGENCY AND ORGANIZATION

In this last section we turn to examine women's agency and organization, beginning with the importance of identity, education and political representation. We then finish with a look at some positive examples of women organizing to support each other, represent their interests and drive change.

Boserup tended to use an economic lens to analyse patterns of behaviour including her treatment of religion and identity. Her discussion of polygamy in Chapter 2 centred on the economic arguments for a husband wanting more than one wife, such as better access to land and labour. But economics does not provide the whole picture, as a man may also want to take another wife to have more children and improve his status in a community. In Chapter 10, Boserup did acknowledge important interactions between culture and economy. In her analysis of agricultural wage labour, she addressed the social gap between households cultivating their own land and agricultural labourers. An "inevitable effect of this social gap is to encourage the cultivator's wife to retire into seclusion and to avoid all the manual work outside the household, in order to distinguish herself from the despised and hard-working female labourers, even if this means that she must live in utter poverty" (p. 54). Sarah White's (1992) work on the practice of seclusion demonstrates a similar phenomenon whereby better-off rural women in Bangladesh are more subject to purdah (seclusion) norms than poor women.

Since 1970 more work has been done to understand the complex interrelations between culture, identity, religion and reactions to global political forces. Purdah and hijab (wearing a veil) are claimed by some women as a political statement or form of resistance to western society and current western foreign policy. This is particularly pertinent today with the close alignment between politics and religion. We see this in the continued conflicts in the Middle East, Iraq and Afghanistan as well as