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Other Persons: Staab, Silke; Razavi, Shahrashoub

## Book

# Gendered dimensions of development

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### Kontakt/Contact

ZBW – Leibniz-Informationszentrum Wirtschaft/Leibniz Information Centre for Economics  
Düsternbrooker Weg 120  
24105 Kiel (Germany)  
E-Mail: [rights\[at\]zbw.eu](mailto:rights[at]zbw.eu)  
<https://www.zbw.eu/econis-archiv/>

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UNRISD CLASSICS  
V O L . I I



## Gendered Dimensions of Development

Compiled and introduced by **Silke Staab** and **Shahra Razavi**



**UNRISD**  
United Nations Research Institute for Social Development





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Silke Staab and Shahra Razavi*

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## About the Cover Art

*The Silent One* by Dubai-based artist Sana Jamlaney (India, 1984) is part of a series of four paintings. “I paint portraits of the society I live in,” she says, “it is impossible not to be affected by and respond to it. The topics highlighted by UNRISD resonated with me. They evoked many themes and issues I grapple with on a regular basis, in both my daily life and my artwork.”

With each painting in this series the artist has aimed to portray a segment of society in contemporary India, a multifaceted perspective of women with a strong voice, but one which may be silenced by social structures. Says Jamlaney: “This series doesn’t just discuss the circumstances that befall these women, but also articulates the fact that these women’s plight often falls on deaf ears; in their own homes, in the government, and in institutions constructed by their own society.” UNRISD has selected this vibrant, energetic, powerful work to convey the importance of giving expression to the unheard, ignored, excluded voices.

The UNRISD *Visions of Change* call encouraged creative thinkers from all over the world to submit artwork illustrating key social development values and themes of equity, sustainability, inclusion, and progressive social change.

## About UNRISD

The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) is an autonomous research institute within the United Nations system that undertakes multidisciplinary research and policy analysis on the social dimensions of contemporary development issues. Through our work, we aim to ensure that social equity, inclusion and justice are central to development thinking, policy and practice.

UNRISD depends entirely on voluntary contributions from national governments, multilateral donors, foundations and other sources. The Institute receives no financial support from the regular budget of the United Nations. In supporting UNRISD, our donors contribute to the crucial but often neglected goal of assuring a diversity of views and voices on development issues at the highest level in the global system.

UNRISD gratefully acknowledges support from its institutional and project donors. For details, see [www.unrisd.org/funders](http://www.unrisd.org/funders).

UNRISD, Palais des Nations  
1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland  
T: (41 22) 9173020  
[info@unrisd.org](mailto:info@unrisd.org)  
[www.unrisd.org](http://www.unrisd.org)

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## Acknowledgements

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The idea of re-issuing “classic” UNRISD texts—some of the Institute’s most influential and ground-breaking research that remains highly relevant to today’s development debates—came from Rheem Al-Adhami; the thematic three-volume approach came from Peter Utting, who also made the initial selection.

Overall coordination of UNRISD Classics was ensured by the UNRISD Communications and Outreach Unit, led by Jenifer Freedman.

Adrienne Smith, Sylvie Brenninkmeijer-Liu and Inês Schølberg Marques helped get the production process off the ground, scanning pre-digital-age printed publications, converting them using optical character recognition software and reviewing the results.

Rhonda Gibbes did several rounds of copyediting and compared electronic versions with the original printed products, ensuring we stayed as close as possible to the original published texts.

Suroor Alikhan took charge of the final copyediting and page layout, and proofread, with Jenifer Freedman, the online versions.

When they first see UNRISD Classics, many readers will be taken by the striking cover art. The covers are the winning entries from UNRISD’s 2013 *Visions of Change* competition, coordinated by Jordi Vaqué. We thank everyone who submitted their work, and especially the artists whose work was selected: Ima Montoya (Spain), *De paso* (“Passing”) for Volume I; Sana Jamlaney (India), *The Silent One* for Volume II; and Kuros Zahedi (Iran), *Human Nature* for Volume III. Sergio Sandoval Fonseca produced the covers for the online versions based on an original concept by Jordi Vaqué.

UNRISD is indebted to all its collaborating researchers—not only those whose work is reproduced here but all those who have contributed to the Institute’s work over five decades, helping to create the rich legacy represented in UNRISD Classics.

We are also grateful to the United Nations: UNRISD is able to achieve what it does because of its unique institutional location and the opportunities provided by close engagement with others in the UN family.

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We also acknowledge our supporters worldwide who regularly tell us that UNRISD has such a wealth of relevant work, and people need to be reminded of it.

Last, but by no means least, UNRISD is grateful for support from the following governments over the last five decades, without whose contributions our work would not have been possible: Australia, Austria, Canada, Cuba, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Jamaica, Mexico, the Netherlands, Nicaragua, Norway, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Yugoslavia. It was thanks to a special grant of \$1 million from the government of the Netherlands that UNRISD was established in 1963.



## **Editors' Note**

Some changes have been made to standardize the presentation of chapters in this volume. The original texts have been reset to fit the present format. Boxes, figures and tables have been renumbered. There has been some light copyediting, mainly to standardize usage throughout the volumes and in some cases, for clarity.

# Acronyms/Abbreviations

AIDS	Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome
AIWC	All India Women's Conference
ANC	African National Congress
ART	Anti-retroviral therapy
ARTEP	Asian Regional Team for Employment Promotion
ASSA	Actuarial Society of South Africa
AWID	Association for Women's Rights in Development
BID	Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo ( <i>Inter-American Development Bank/IDB</i> )
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
BWI	Bretton Woods institution
CABE	Central Advisory Board on Education
CAPOW	Coalition of Actively Participating Organizations of Women
CBO	Community-based organization
CEAL	Centro Editor de América Latina ( <i>Latin American Publishing Centre</i> )
CEBRAP	Centro Brasileiro de Análise e Planejamento ( <i>Brazilian Center for Analysis and Research</i> )
CEDAW	United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CEDES	Centro de Estudios de Estado y Sociedad ( <i>Centre for the Study of State and Society</i> )
CEPAL	Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe ( <i>Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean—ECLAC</i> )
CESCR	Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
CFFC	Catholics for a Free Choice
CIEDS	Centre for Informal Education and Development Studies
CIESAS	Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social ( <i>Centre for Research and Higher Education in Social Anthropology</i> )
Cinterfor	Centro Interamericano para el Desarrollo del Conocimiento en la Formación Profesional ( <i>Inter-American Centre for Knowledge Development in Vocational Training</i> )
CISMU	Composição da Comissão Intersetorial de Saúde da Mulher ( <i>Women's Health Cross-Sectoral Commission</i> )
CLACSO	Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales ( <i>Latin American Council of Social Sciences</i> )
CLADEM	Comité de América Latina y el Caribe para la Defensa de los Derechos de la Mujer ( <i>Latin American and Caribbean Committee for the Defence of Women's Rights</i> )
CMSS	Chhattisgarh Mines Shramik Sangh ( <i>Chhattisgarh Mines Workers' Union</i> )
CNDM	Conselho Nacional dos Direitos da Mulher ( <i>National Council on Women's Rights</i> )
CNPD	Comissão Nacional de População e Desenvolvimento ( <i>National Commission on Population and Development</i> )
COBSE	Council of Boards of School Education in India
CPI	Communist Party of India
CPI(ML)	Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)
CPM / CPI(M)	Communist Party of India (Marxist)
CPT	Communist Party of Thailand
CRLP	Center for Reproductive Law and Policy
CSG	Child support grant
CSUTCB	Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia ( <i>Unified Syndical Confederation of Rural Workers of Bolivia</i> )
CWPE	Committee on Women, Population and the Environment
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DALY	Disability-adjusted life year
DAW	Division for the Advancement of Women ( <i>now merged with three other UN entities in 2010 to form UN Women</i> )

DAWN	Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era
DFID	United Kingdom Department for International Development
DISH	Delivery of Improved Services for Health
DPEP	District Primary Education Project
EARC	East African Royal Commission
ECD	Early childhood development
ECLAC	Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
ECOSOC	United Nations Economic and Social Council
EFA	Education For All
EPWP	Expanded Public Works Programme
EPZ	Export processing zone
ERA	Equal Rights Amendment
ETLT	Evolutionary theory of land tenure
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FDI	Foreign direct investment
FGM	Female genital mutilation
FPAI	Family Planning Association of India
G-77	Group of 77
GAD	Gender and development
GADN	Gender and Development Network
GDI	Gender-Related Development Index
GDP	Gross domestic product
GEAR	Growth, Employment and Redistribution
GEM	Gender Empowerment Measure
GenDev	Office of Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment
GER	Gross Enrolment Ratio
GLRA	Gender and law reform in Africa
GNP	Gross national product
GPI	Gender Parity Index
GRO	Grassroots organization
HCT	Human capital theory
HDI	Human Development Index
HERA	Health, Empowerment, Rights and Accountability
HIPC	Heavily indebted poor countries
Hisbol	Instituto de Historia Social Boliviana ( <i>Institute for Bolivian Social History</i> )
HIV	Human immunodeficiency virus
HLP	High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda
HSR	Health sector reform
ICDC	International Child Development Centre
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
ICPD	International Conference on Population and Development
ICRW	International Center for Research on Women
IDASA	Institute for Democracy in South Africa ( <i>originally: Institute for a Democratic Alternative for South Africa</i> )
IDB	Inter-American Development Bank
IFI	International financial institution
IFPRI	International Food Policy Research Institute
IFPS	Innovation in Family Planning Services

IGO	Intergovernmental organization
IGTN	International Gender and Trade Network
IIED	International Institute for Environment and Development
ILET	Instituto Latinoamericano de Estudios Transnacionales ( <i>Latin American Institute for Transnational Studies</i> )
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INGO	International non-governmental organization
IPF	Indian People's Front
IPPF	International Planned Parenthood Federation
I-PRSP	Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
IRRAG	International Reproductive Rights Research Action Group
ISI	Import substitution industrialization
IWHC	International Women's Health Coalition
IWY	International Women's Year
JMM	Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (Jharkhand Liberation Front)
LACWHN	Latin American and Caribbean Women's Health Network
LIKHAAN	Linangan ng Kababaihan, Inc. ( <i>Women's Institute</i> )
LPD	Land Policy Division
Manuela	Movimento Manuela Ramos (Manuela Ramos Movement)
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
MFA	Multi Fibre Arrangement
MHRD	Ministry of Human Resource Development
MIS	Monitoring and information system
MSU	Michigan State University
NAC	National Action Committee on the Status of Women
NAF	National Abortion Federation
NBER	National Bureau of Economic Research
NCERT	National Council of Educational Research and Training
NFIW	National Federation of Indian Women
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NHE	New Home Economics
NPO	Non-profit organization
NPU	National Population Unit
NRI	Natural Resources Institute
NSP	New social policy
ODA	Official development assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
OPEC	Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
PAI	Population Action International
PAISM	Programa de Assistência Integral à Saúde da Mulher ( <i>Programme for Integrated Women's Health Care</i> )
PAN	Partido Acción Nacional ( <i>National Action Party</i> )
PFA	Platform for Action
POA	Programme of Action
POW	Progressive Organization of Women
PRA	Participatory rural appraisal
PRB	Population Reference Bureau

PRD	Partido de la Revolución Democrática ( <i>Party of the Democratic Revolution</i> )
PrepCom	Preparatory Committee Meeting
PRI	Partido Revolucionario Institucional ( <i>Institutional Revolutionary Party</i> )
PROGRESA	Programa de Educación, Salud y Alimentación ( <i>Education, Health and Nutrition Program</i> )
PRONASOL	Programa Nacional de Solidaridad Económica ( <i>National Solidarity Programme</i> )
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
PSS	Purogami Stri Sanghatana ( <i>Progressive Women's Organization</i> )
RAINBO	Research Action and Information Network for the Bodily Integrity of Women
RCH	Reproductive and child health
RDP	Reconstruction and Development Programme
Rede Saúde	Rede Nacional Feminista de Saúde Direitos Sexuais e Direitos Reprodutivos ( <i>National Feminist Health and Reproductive Rights Network</i> )
ReproSalud	Reproductive Health in the Community project
RPB	Research and Policy Brief
RTI	Reproductive tract infection
SAP	Structural adjustment programme
SCP	Satyashodhak Communist Party
SEDESOL	Secretaría de Desarrollo Social ( <i>Secretariat of Social Development</i> )
SEWA	Self Employed Women's Association
SEZ	Special economic zone
SKMS	Satyashodhak Kashtakari Mahila Sabha
SNA	System of National Accounts
SNDP	Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana ( <i>Sree Narayana Trust</i> )
SNDT	Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey Women's University
SNS	Satyanarayan Singh
SOE	State-owned enterprise
SPA	Special Program of Assistance for Africa
SSA	Sub-Saharan Africa
STD	Sexually transmitted disease
SUS	Sistema Único de Saúde ( <i>Universal Health System</i> )
TFA	Target-Free Approach
TIE	Transnationals Information Exchange
TNC	Transnational corporation
TUS	Time Use Survey
TVE	Town and village enterprise
UBINIG	Unnayan Bikalper Nitinirdharoni Gobeshona ( <i>Policy Research for Development Alternative</i> )
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNAIDS	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
UNCED	United Nations Conference on Environment and Development
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UN DESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women ( <i>now merged with three other UN entities to form UN Women</i> )



UN-NGLS	United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service
UNRISD	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
UNU	United Nations University
UNU-WIDER	United Nations University–World Institute for Development Economics Research
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
UP	Uttar Pradesh
UPBEP	Uttar Pradesh Basic Education Project
US	United States
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
vs	Versus
WCARRD	World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development
WDR	World Development Report
WEDO	Women’s Environment and Development Organization
WEDPRO	Women’s Education Development Productivity and Research Organization
WGNRR	Women’s Global Network for Reproductive Rights
WHO	World Health Organization
WHP	Women’s Health Project
WHSMP	Women’s Health and Safe Motherhood Project
WID	Women in development
WIEGO	Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing
WLSA	Women Law Students Association
WSF	World Social Forum
WSSD	World Summit for Social Development
WTO	World Trade Organization



## *Foreword*

# **No Shortcuts to Realizing Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment**

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In working towards equitable and sustainable development goals, feminist policy advocacy must be combined with rigorous research for transformative effect. The broad span of women's movements have long relied on the knowledge, vocabulary and perspective of feminist scholarship to evaluate social, economic and political structures and frame their claims for equal rights. These tools have allowed activists to call out injustices and challenge discriminatory laws, policies and practices that were once seen as natural.

UNRISD's research on the gendered dimensions of development has played a crucial role in this process. Firmly committed to human rights, socioeconomic justice and democratic participation, UNRISD has questioned the conventional wisdom and exposed gaps in mainstream policy approaches. In doing so, its research has informed policy deliberations at the global and national level. UNRISD's report on the political and social economy of care, for example, paved the way for the necessary visibility of unpaid care work in the ongoing discussions of the post-2015 development agenda.

UNRISD's research has shown that gender inequalities persist both in the "micro" spaces of day to day life and in the seemingly gender-neutral macro structures of labour markets, finance and trade. We know that inequality in the public sphere is often paralleled by unequal power relations in the private sphere. If women and girls are to enjoy their full rights to bodily integrity, economic opportunity, freedom from violence, and full participation in decision making, then change must occur in all areas. It is just as important to confront discriminatory social norms at the domestic and community level, as it is to transform the structures that constrain women's voice and agency in the macroeconomic and political arenas. UNRISD's work has been a constant reminder that the realization of women's rights is everybody's business; women and girls, men and boys.

As we mark 20 years since the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action and define a new sustainable development agenda, research and accountability are more important than ever. This collection clearly shows that there are no shortcuts to realizing gender equality and women's empowerment. Despite important achievements over the past decades, gender bias remains deeply entrenched in the minds of individuals, institutions and society.

I am convinced that UNRISD's work will continue to highlight these inequalities and contribute toward the transformation of families, societies, economies and political life, and the empowerment of all women and girls.

*Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka*  
*Executive Director*  
*UN Women*

New York, April 2015

*Note from UNRISD Director*

## **UNRISD Classics: Celebrating 50 Years of UNRISD Research for Social Change**

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UNRISD Classics, three volumes of selected UNRISD publications prepared to celebrate 50 years of research on social development, prompts reflection on the role research plays in processes of social change and, more specifically, within the United Nations system.

Established in 1963, UNRISD was the inspiration of two intellectual giants of the United Nations: Nobel Laureates Jan Tinbergen and Gunnar Myrdal. These leading thinkers understood that neglect of social questions in development thinking and practice would compromise the “development project” itself. They also recognized the importance of an independent research function at the heart of the UN, separate from advisory and operational work, but able to feed directly into “action programmes of the United Nations system”. In its founding Bulletin, UNRISD was granted autonomous status within the United Nations system by the then Secretary-General, U Thant, to ensure that it could freely conduct critical research, even on politically sensitive issues.

Today’s realities demonstrate the continued importance of this founding vision—the need for research on social issues that is independent, directed to policy making, and responsive to changes in the global context. Equity, rights and social justice—issues that put people at the heart of the development process—have returned as the foundational principles of a new global “sustainable development” framework. But today’s realities also remind us that such an agenda must be continually revisited and renegotiated, priorities redefined and supported with new evidence. For example, in the early years, “dethroning GDP” through developing and incorporating social indicators into measures of “development” seemed a possibility; the political and ideological struggles at the heart of such an agenda appear more formidable today. Likewise, progress made in areas such as sexual and reproductive rights encounters resistance and needs to be continually defended. Autonomous spaces, such as that represented by UNRISD, for revisiting and renegotiating priorities, fostering debate and presenting alternatives are thus worth protecting.

Over five decades, UNRISD has worked—indeed, at times struggled—to keep alive the vision that drove its founders. It has expanded the ideas of “social development”, taking on more radical issues, often challenging the discourse of powerful actors, playing “David with the Goliaths of international development”. Along the way it has posed questions to the work of the United Nations itself—UNRISD work on a unified approach to development during the 1960s and 1970s “was a reaction to the way policy makers



dealt with social issues as an add-on to economic policy rather than an integral part of a development strategy”, foreshadowing current discussions about “coherence”. The Institute has also shown the value of an independent space for raising critical questions and generating the evidence to challenge dominant policies and practices when they have adverse social effects—as in its work on the Green Revolution, structural adjustment and globalization.

The three volumes of UNRISD Classics bring together a selection of critical writing, produced since the 1960s, illustrating some of the enduring themes and issues that have been central to UNRISD’s work and have shaped the UN’s social development agenda. Grouped around the contemporary themes of social policy, gender, and sustainable development, the essays present work evolving from the Institute’s early focus on social indicators and measurement issues which fed into economic planning processes, through rural and community development, environmental issues, participation and empowerment, to pioneering work on women and gender in development; studies that brought new—and at the time controversial—perspectives to formidable challenges such as illicit drugs, ethnic conflict and political violence; influential research that brought social policy back onto the development agenda; examination of the distributional impacts of macroeconomic and trade policies, and—more recently, in advance of the global community—highlighting inequality as a development problem and obstacle to poverty reduction.

These landmark publications by researchers associated with UNRISD—staff, participants in research projects, commissioned authors—illustrate the breadth, significance and relevance of the Institute’s research over 50 years. In making this selection, a vast body of UNRISD research was reviewed: the choice reflects works that have an enduring value and message, where we see the reflection in contemporary concerns, where past research and evidence have significantly shaped new ideas or policy debates that are widely accepted today, or have contributed to the generation and diffusion of alternative development thinking around the globe. The selection also illustrates key features of how the Institute works: from the early days, UNRISD developed a strong emphasis on empirical research conducted, where possible, by researchers based in developing countries, providing opportunities for them to work with researchers from other countries concerned with similar issues and to channel their findings to an international audience.

UNRISD Classics are being launched in 2015, a pivotal moment for the international community as it works towards a new global consensus on a universal sustainable development agenda. Reflections on these “50 years of research for social change” raise fundamental questions—about the social costs and consequences of economic development paths that cannot be sustained ecologically, economically or socially. The volumes remind us that today’s questions and concerns are not new, though they may now be more urgent. There is greater technical and technological know-how, and possibly more political will, to address them: but there is also awareness of the limitations of technological or “quick fix” solutions in the light of greater complexity. The essays remind us above all that development requires social progress, but that such progress is reversible; that change in other domains (economic growth, demographic transition, environmental degradation) has consequences—often unforeseen or unintended; that such change is rarely if ever neutral with regard to different social groups (by gender, ethnicity or age for example); and that processes of social change are fundamentally entangled with power relations and with politics. Continued progress

requires eternal vigilance: a modest price to pay is the support of institutional spaces—often small, often fragile—with the mandate and autonomy to remain vigilant.

We hope these essays also remind readers of the legacy of United Nations ideas that have shaped and changed the world, and the role of UNRISD within this. Assessing the impact of the intellectual endeavor represented by any body of research is not easy. Research outputs and ideas rarely translate in any immediate or easily measurable way into changes in policies, attitudes or practices. The historical record provided here shines a light on the enduring relevance and impact of such research over the long term. It provides insights for those who believe that we must continue to push the boundaries of political discourse beyond a focus on economic growth and poverty reduction towards a broader understanding of development that includes human well-being, equity, sustainability, democratic governance and social justice. It also demonstrates the continued necessity of preserving the spaces—such as UNRISD—where difficult questions can be raised and debated, bringing into the conversation diverse voices, marginalized viewpoints and different forms of knowledge in our shared efforts to make the world a more just place.

*Sarah Cook*  
*Director , UNRISD*

Geneva, April 2015



## *Introduction*

# **Gendering Development, Engendering Change: Past Research and Present Challenges**

*Silke Staab<sup>1</sup> and Shahra Razavi<sup>2</sup>*

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Over the past 50 years, UNRISD has made important contributions to the generation and diffusion of alternative development thinking across the globe. It has sponsored and supported original research in places where resources for such research are often hard to come by; it has brought together scholars and activists from different contexts to discuss and exchange their ideas; and it has used its own research capacity to nurture policy debates at different levels. In doing so, UNRISD has played David with the Goliaths of international development. With a limited set of resources and a genuine commitment to social justice, it has critically engaged with the discourse and practice of much more powerful actors. It has challenged many of the taken-for-granted assumptions that underpin the policy prescriptions of international financial institutions and donors; provided evidence of their often detrimental impact on the ground; drawn attention to the interests and power structures that sustain them; highlighted a range of “actually existing” alternatives; and lent a voice to those who believe that sustainable development, social justice and gender equality are more than a pipe dream.

As part of this broader institutional endeavour, UNRISD’s research on gender and development has been informed by the evolving debates within feminist scholarship and activism, and in turn has contributed to them. While early scholarship on the gender dimensions of development focused largely on power relations within the private sphere of families and households, interest in the seemingly gender-neutral institutions of the public sphere gradually increased throughout the 1980s, reflecting broader shifts within feminism itself. A growing body of research highlighted how both state and market institutions were important “bearers of gender” (Whitehead 1979). UNRISD’s research on gender mainstreaming in the early 1990s was animated by and made significant contributions to this literature. It depicted development organizations as highly gendered arenas that

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<sup>1</sup> Silke Staab worked at UNRISD as a Research Analyst on the Political and Social Economy of Care Project between June 2008 and May 2010. She is now Research Specialist at UN Women. In 2014, Silke received her PhD in Politics from the University of Manchester. She specializes in gender, politics and social policy with a particular focus on Latin America.

<sup>2</sup> Shahra Razavi was Research Co-ordinator at UNRISD from 1993 to 2013. She left UNRISD to join UN Women as Chief, Research and Data, at the end of June 2013. Shahra specializes in the gender dimensions of social development, with a particular focus on livelihoods and social policies.

provided uneven terrains for feminist incursions and often proved resistant to the institutionalization of women's interests. A similar cross-fertilization between UNRISD research and the gender and development scholarship was evident in the post-2000 period, as development institutions rediscovered the social arena. UNRISD's research on the gender dimensions of social policy and the care economy contributed to the feminist critique of the narrowing down of social policy to single policy instruments, such as conditional cash transfers often targeted to women as mothers and caregivers, and the all-too-common disconnect between a rediscovered "social" policy and an unreconstructed "economic" policy that remained centred around markets and fiscal restraint.

Assessing the political impact of this intellectual endeavour is not easy. Ideas do not translate in any immediate way into development policy making. They do not lead to instant and easily measurable changes in attitudes or practices. Rather, their effects are mediated by the broader environment: they become influential through their interaction with institutional forces and political actors. Yet there is a growing consensus that "ideas are not mere epiphenomena" (Béland 2009:708). Because ideas help political actors make sense of their goals and interests, they can empower disadvantaged groups and lend legitimacy to their claims. At a moment where a "new" global consensus is in the making, UNRISD research on gender and development provides important insights for those who believe that it is necessary to push the boundaries of political discourse beyond its current focus on economic growth and poverty reduction toward a broader understanding of development that includes human well-being, equity, sustainability, democratic governance and social justice (UNRISD 2011).

## **About This Collection**

This collection forms part of a trilogy that draws on past UNRISD research to inform current global debates on development alternatives. It brings together and revisits selected publications on gender and development that speak to some of the key issues at stake in the current context. We believe that many of the analytical insights they provide remain highly pertinent: they shed light on the multiple challenges of gender equity in an increasingly unequal world and they invite reflection on the possibilities and pitfalls of integrating gender into development policy and practice.

The collection is divided into two parts. The first part brings together a series of contributions that analyse development institutions, processes and policies from a gender perspective: fiscal austerity, land rights, export-oriented employment, economic policy, social protection, girls' education, household and family structures, and unpaid care are some of the themes taken up by these chapters. The second part of the volume is concerned with the diverse manifestations of women's agency, the strategies that have been deployed to produce gender-egalitarian change, and the complexities of individual and collective empowerment. They draw our attention to the multiple sites of struggle—from households and community kitchens to international development institutions—as well as to the different facets of feminism as a transformative project: a project that is as much about challenging dominant discourses and changing daily practices as it is about the elimination of male bias in formal institutional arrangements.

Taken together, the chapters in this volume raise a number of issues that should be central to any agenda emerging from the ongoing debates and negotiations. Some of these issues were too easily sidelined in the process of designing the Millennium Development



Goals (MDGs) and continue to be marginal to the current discussions about development. Despite the burgeoning literature on the gendered effects of recurrent economic crises, for example, gender continues to be seen as irrelevant to macroeconomic policy making (and macroeconomic policy making continues to be marginal to mainstream debates about development). While paid and unpaid economies are restructured in conspicuously gendered ways, mainstream development thinking continues to rely on a narrow economic understanding of women's empowerment, distorting the transformative thrust of an idea that originated in the feminist movement. From the mainstream perspective, empowerment is to be achieved by integrating women into pre-existing economic structures rather than by transforming those structures in order to guarantee women's civil, political, economic and social rights. As a corollary, the existence of disempowering relationships both in the market and at home goes unchallenged; unpaid care continues to be an invisible and fragile safety net, particularly in the face of economic disasters; and the state, strapped for resources and regulatory control, is bound to be irresponsive to women's rights and needs. As Naila Kabeer's contribution to this volume reminds us, women's access to economic resources should not be conflated with their empowerment. Rather, we need to ask about "the kinds of agency and choices that women are able to exercise as a result of their 'access' to the resource in question".

Similarly, while efforts to increase the number of women in political office have multiplied, these efforts have been divorced from attempts to enhance the clout of women's presence by strengthening state accountability and democratic citizenship. Most macroeconomic decision making, in particular, remains removed from processes of political participation and public scrutiny. One of the reasons behind the relatively fast and smooth adoption of gender quotas and reserved seats—now a reality in more than one hundred countries around the world—may indeed be that they do not challenge "the broader ethos of neoliberalism focused on non-intervention in the economy" (Krook 2008). Selective processes of consultation during policy design with little import on final decisions, or civil society involvement during policy implementation and service delivery, have been insufficient to change this broader pattern. Finally, the feminist quest for transforming and democratizing power relations at the household level is reflected only partially and half-heartedly in mainstream development agendas and discourses. The domestic realm continues to be a key site for the reproduction of gender inequality and the violation of women's rights. Yet current debates remain either silent or ambiguous about issues such as domestic violence, unpaid care, and sexual and reproductive rights beyond maternal health services.

### **(Re)thinking Gender and Development: Lessons from UNRISD Research**

Rethinking development requires both greater depth and greater breadth with regard to the ways in which gender (in)equality is conceived and addressed. While it would be presumptuous to claim that UNRISD research provides a recipe for how this can be done, the chapters in this volume afford important insights that can inform the conversation. On the one hand, they raise a series of issues that need to figure much more prominently in current development debates. Some resonate with the need for a broader transformative agenda: putting economic and social rights at the core of the

macroeconomic framework (*Elson*), generating decent and equitable employment opportunities (*Razavi and Pearson*), ensuring equitable access and sustainable use of land (*Whitehead and Tsikata*), recognizing and redistributing the responsibilities for unpaid care and social reproduction (*UNRISD; Budlender and Lund; Elson; Moore*), and moving toward more universal social policies that take women's needs and gender power relations into account (*Molyneux; Jha and Subrahmanian*). On the other hand, the contributions to this volume address women's human rights more specifically, including their bodily integrity, and reproductive and sexual choice (*Petchesky; Sen*). Taken together they endorse the position of many women's organizations that, in the context of current debates about post-MDG goals and targets, have argued for a "twin track" approach, including a transformative stand-alone goal on gender equality as well as increased efforts to integrate gender into all other goals.<sup>3</sup> However, rather than providing a laundry list of new goals and targets on gender equality and women's empowerment, the chapters in this volume invite us to (re)think gender and development processes in much more fundamental ways. There are a number of common themes that cut across and move beyond the salience of specific issue areas. In the paragraphs that follow, we highlight these themes and the insights they hold for current debates.

### ***Understanding context and complexity***

The causes of gender inequality are multiple and complex; they cut across different institutional arenas, both public and private (states, markets, communities, families), and intersect with other social hierarchies (class, race, caste, kinship). It is hence not surprising that the contributions to this volume share an emphasis on variation, complexity and ambiguity in terms of the gender implications of development processes and policies. They draw our attention to the contextually and historically specific ways in which unequal gender relations are constituted, and they remind us of the fact that gains may be contradictory and fragile. The emphasis on context and complexity is more than analytical gusto; it is a distinctive and necessary perspective with important implications for development policy and practice. Indeed, several of the contributions reveal how a superficial nod to context can jeopardize policy objectives and have detrimental effects for women's rights (*Razavi and Miller; Whitehead and Tsikata; Jha and Subrahmanian*). In their analysis of girls' access to secondary education in Uttar Pradesh, for example, *Jyotsna Jha and Ramya Subrahmanian* argue that the failure to increase female enrolment was largely due to an ill-designed policy focused on the supply of educational services. Thus, the government subsidized the creation of private girls-only schools without consideration for the deterring effect of school fees, especially in the context of conservative social norms. Policy makers underestimated not only the fact that many parents would struggle to afford those fees but also the fact that they might be less willing to do so for daughters. As a result, the actual uptake of female secondary education remained low.

Other contributions remind us that progress toward gender equality is uneven and ambiguous (*Elson; Razavi and Pearson; Omvedt; Jelin*). While some forms of gender inequality may be undermined by development policies and processes, others may be (re)created. *Shahra Razavi and Ruth Pearson's* synthesis of the gendered connections between export-oriented employment and social policy is a good example. Drawing on a

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<sup>3</sup> For example, ActionAid 2013; GADN 2013; UN Women 2013.

large number of case studies, they argue that the extent to which women's employment in export-oriented production has translated into more secure access to social rights and welfare entitlements has varied significantly across countries. They attribute this variation to the interaction of export-led industrial strategies (for example, state-interventionist versus laissez-faire) and social policy regimes (for example, universal versus targeted). Yet "neither in the globally 'successful' countries, nor elsewhere, have labour markets been a site of gender equality". Modest gains in terms of labour force participation must be seen alongside persistent and rigid gender hierarchies in terms of job segregation, formal/informal employment and wage levels. Furthermore, as repeated economic crises have taught us, some of these trends may be easily reversed.

### ***Problematizing policy blueprints***

A second and related theme in this volume is the recognition that there are no simple solutions to complex problems. Growth alone will not do away with "archaic" gender hierarchies—an assumption that was long taken for granted and only recently abandoned by the World Bank (2011)—neither will national women's machineries or gender quotas automatically improve women's substantive representation (Goetz). Greater access to paid employment does not, in and of itself, enhance women's say in household decisions (Razavi and Miller) or translate into greater social rights and protection (Razavi and Pearson). Against this backdrop, several of the chapters included in this volume point to the very concrete perils associated with the global promotion of blanket policies. Ann Whitehead and Dzodzi Tsikata's chapter critically engages with the policy blueprints for enhancing women's land rights in sub-Saharan Africa during the 1990s. From their point of view, the dichotomy between individual land titling and customary law has been unhelpful for identifying contextually specific needs and constraints on women's livelihoods in rural Africa. In effect, neither approach represents a straightforward solution. In the case of land titles, insufficient attention has been paid to other factors that may be more important in shaping women's interests in land, including the command of labour and capital and access to markets. The "flight into the customary", in turn, ignores power relations in the countryside and their implications for women. Similarly, Jyotsna Jha and Ramya Subrahmanian cast doubt on global recommendations to prioritize investments in primary education by showing how many of the empowering effects for girls in India actually kick in at the secondary level.

### ***Minding the gaps***

The contributions also raise a number of recurrent gaps: between global discourses and local realities, formal and substantive rights, visible and invisible contributions. Rosalind Petchesky and Gita Sen, for example, both point to important progress in terms of global norms and discourses on women's sexual and reproductive rights. Yet the political and macroeconomic challenges of translating global commitments into palpable changes at the national and local levels have been daunting. While political opposition by religious forces often jeopardizes legislative action, the lack of funding for comprehensive health care services means that sexual and reproductive rights cannot be guaranteed in practice. Diane Elson's chapter makes a broader argument about how the growing pledge to promote democracy and human rights has been undermined by the orthodox macroeconomic policy framework. Neoliberal economic policies have created a disabling environment characterized by economic instability, financial volatility and fiscal

constraint. As a result, she argues, there has been regress rather than progress in the realization of women's rights on the ground. The increasing privatization of risk, responsibility and livelihoods promoted by those policies strongly "relies on the unspoken and invisible safety net of women's unpaid work".

Similarly, UNRISD's work on the care economy draws attention to the interdependent and mutually constitutive relationships between states, markets, households and communities in social provision. It is crucial that the roles, responsibilities and relations among these institutions be factored into any attempt to conceptualize social and economic development. Yet despite important efforts to place unpaid care squarely onto the development agenda—for example, in the context of the 2009 Commission on the Status of Women (Bedford 2012)—the report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda (2013) remains disturbingly silent on this issue. *Debbie Budlender and Francie Lund's* study of care arrangements in South Africa provides a concrete example of a context where "basic resources for social reproduction are lacking". Their chapter draws our attention to lasting effects of apartheid on family and employment structures with far-reaching implications for the distribution of responsibilities and resources for care. Indeed, in a context of "missing men" (O'Laughlin 1998), limited economic opportunities and excessively high care burdens, many women have to fulfil the roles of breadwinners and caregivers alike. While the government has made significant investments in social provision, the extent to which these efforts can compensate for multiple market and family failures is evidently limited.

### **Resisting dominant discourses**

The importance of discursive struggles is a fourth issue that emerges strongly from the chapters in this volume. Feminist scholars have long pointed to the consequential effects of problem representation and framing (Bacchi 1999; Fraser 1987). Resisting discourses and redefining narratives that sustain unequal power relations have been key features of feminist struggles. In terms of reframing sexual and reproductive rights, for example, both *Gita Sen* and *Rosalind Petchesky* point to the "very significant transformations in the language and content of discourse" (*Sen*) spurred by feminist activists. Thus, the early emphasis on the need to control population growth—a goal that was often pursued by way of unethical practices in population policies and programmes—gave way to a new paradigm that explicitly affirmed women's right to make informed and autonomous decisions in sexual and reproductive matters.

*Henrietta Moore's* chapter further illustrates the importance of discourse and framing. Focusing on the early 1990s, she argues that "[t]he increasing tendency to blame families, and very often women within those families, for their inability to survive the structural changes wrought by increasing market integration and globalization is one way of avoiding an analysis of the causes and consequences of poverty and immiseration. The notion of a crisis in the family is to be resisted because of the way in which such a moral discourse prevents a proper analysis of the situation many families face and justifies the denial of responsibility by the state and other institutions." Twenty years later her analysis acquires a sad new relevance: as fiscal austerity measures take hold across countries affected by the debt crisis, family relations and livelihoods must again be maintained from a diminished resource base.

Re-establishing the responsibility and accountability of state and market actors is hence essential. In the current context, this includes "appropriate forms of democratic

social regulation” (*Elson*) in order to ensure that human rights are respected and protected by states and markets alike. Resisting narratives that “characterize such regulation as ‘red tape’ that necessarily obstructs growth” (*Elson and Balakrishnan 2012:4*) and challenging the notion of private business as an innocent “development partner”—as the report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda (2013) has it—are an important part of this process. Without proper regulation and enforcement, private business practice often undermines sustainable, rights-based development and gender equality through exploitative working conditions, discriminatory hiring practices, environmental degradation and land grabbing.

### **Strategic framing: Possibilities and pitfalls**

Strategic framing—that is, the deliberate effort to fashion an understanding of women’s rights and gender equality that legitimates and motivates collective action—is another facet of discursive processes. Thus, gender equality advocates have often framed their claims in ways that resonate with their cultural or political context in order to appeal to the idea(l)s and garner the interest of policy makers. They have argued, for example, that women’s economic empowerment is good for economic growth or that domestic violence is antithetical to family values. Several contributions highlight the possibilities and pitfalls of attempts to graft women’s issues onto broader agendas, including economic growth (*Razavi and Miller*), poverty reduction (*Molyneux*) and population control (*Petchesky; Sen*). On the one hand, this resonance may draw the attention of powerful actors to issues that would otherwise remain marginal to mainstream debates. The strategic use of established tools and terminologies can also be potentially subversive by contesting or reinterpreting mainstream concepts in creative new ways (*Miller and Razavi*). Yet strategic framing can also imply significant trade-offs. Crucial women’s rights issues that do not fit with broader agendas are likely to be sidelined; long-term transformative goals may be sacrificed by short-term compensatory measures; (unintended) consequences may ensue from interventions targeted to women, but tailored to serve other goals; and women’s rights may be insufficiently addressed or even violated in the process.

The business case for women’s empowerment—or investing in women as “smart economics”—is a classic example. *Razavi and Miller* explore the controversial outcomes of this strategy, which dates back to the early 1970s when women in development (WID) advocates sought to make women’s issues relevant by highlighting the positive synergies between women’s empowerment and economic growth. Yet this strategy also produced a number of artificial dichotomies between development and welfare, production and reproduction, women and the family—aspects that in the reality of women’s lives are necessarily linked and integrated. Promoting women’s role in development without consideration for these linkages can have unintended negative consequences, for example, by placing exaggerated demands on women’s time and labour.

Although the discourse on gender and development has changed significantly ever since, instrumentalism remains a problematic issue in development policy and programming. *Maxine Molyneux’s* insightful study of recent anti-poverty programmes in Latin America is a case in point. She argues that women’s central role in new anti-poverty programmes entails both opportunities and risks. On the one hand, it may bring some benefits to women in their role as mothers, including access to cash stipends or maternal and infant health services. On the other hand, it may reinforce their position within the gender division of labour and draw on women’s caregiving roles without providing long-term strategies for economic security. Indeed, women’s own rights and needs have not

been central to these programmes. Instead, women “are primarily positioned as a means to secure programme objectives; they are a conduit of policy in the sense that resources channelled through them are expected to translate into greater improvements in the well-being of children and the family as a whole”.

At the global level, too, instrumental concerns continue to shape development thinking to a significant degree. While there has been some recognition of gender equality as a value in its own right in the *World Development Report 2012*, for example, critics fear that this may be just another process of “windowdressing” (Chant 2012:213). The report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda seems to confirm these apprehensions by arguing bluntly that “women with equal rights are an irreplaceable asset for every society and economy” (2013:34).

### ***Balancing autonomy and cooperation***

Building and sustaining bottom-up pressure is necessary to ensure that women’s rights are comprehensively addressed both in global debates and on the ground. Yet attempts to build broad-based alliances for the advancement of women’s rights—through the interaction with other political forces, including parties, labour unions and independence movements—have faced important challenges. The contributions by *Gail Omvedt* and *Elizabeth Jelin* provide a bottom-up view of women’s collective action in the 1970s and 1980s. Dealing with very different contexts, both chapters draw our attention to the ways in which women’s agency is spurred, conditioned and constrained by broader processes of economic and social change. In doing so, they remind us that the extent to which women’s needs and interests have been recognized and fought for along with those of other oppressed groups has been varied and contradictory. Indeed, in both cases the perennial question of autonomy or integration looms large. The struggle against rape in India, for example, emerged as part of a broader class- and caste-based resistance to the abuse of state authority and economic privilege. As a result, mobilization concentrated on landlord and police rape rather than rape within family or kinship structures. According to *Omvedt*, the fact that during the 1970s and 1980s rape was not taken up as a “women’s issue” had important consequences: “The negative side of the often massive involvement of lower class and lower caste men, as well as women, in these issues was that it reflected traditional, patriarchal ideas: the rape of ‘our’ women was an insult to ‘our’ family, ‘our’ community, and the way to deal with it was to stop women from going out to work or out into the streets and to build the kind of middle-class (and brahmanic) family that protects and secludes women”. Similarly, *Jelin* detects timid attempts to increase women’s participation in union life and ensure that women’s demands are taken up by labour unions in some Latin American countries that returned to democratic rule in the late 1980s. At the same time, she argues, these have not translated into more egalitarian institutional structures: “Equality in terms of power within labour organizations is a demand that is still not mentioned, that is silenced”.

### ***Managing diversity***

Other chapters focus on the heterogeneity of the women’s movement itself. They show that the diversity of strategy and location has created synergies as well as tensions: between institutional insiders and outsiders (*Miller and Razavi*), local and global action (*Petchesky*), research and activism (*Sen*). Feminist activists have long been torn between “entryism” and “disengagement”. Yet, in their analysis of development institutions, *Miller*

and Razavi argue that such a simple dichotomy obscures important differences across institutions and their relative openness to gender concerns. Furthermore, insider-outsider strategies are more usefully conceptualized as complementary rather than alternative approaches. Insiders who know how to navigate institutional constraints can serve as an important transmission mechanism for outsider demands. Indeed, it has long been argued that strong women's movements as well as sympathetic politicians and savvy femocrats are needed to articulate women's demands, translate them into policy issues and garner political support for their agenda (Vargas and Wieringa 1998). In other words, the heterogeneity of women's agency—individual and collective—can be a source of strength. In order to build effective broad-based alliances for women's rights and gender equality, the contributions of different actors in different institutional contexts must be harnessed. As Gita Sen reminds us, this requires the recognition and careful management of differences in ideas, power, status and resources.

### **Enhancing state capacity, responsiveness and accountability**

Yet women's political agency—as legislators, bureaucrats or members of movements—often stalls against deep-seated rules and practices that operate in the very institutions they are trying to transform. As Anne-Marie Goetz argues, “many women seeking to promote women's rights in public office or in civil society find their progressive agendas blocked by the sheer mechanics of governance systems, by the fact that existing patterns of privilege and distorted resource distribution are not necessarily altered just because there are new participants with new ideas”. As a result, the state often remains unresponsive to women's needs—both at the level of policy design and at that of implementation. Institutional transformation geared toward enhancing the capacity, responsiveness and accountability of states for guaranteeing women's rights is therefore a paramount concern. Goetz offers important insights into how such transformations can be approached from a gender perspective. Such an approach requires the creation of a clear mandate in terms of the responsibility of service providers—including health, education, security and justice—to promote women's rights. It also requires the identification and removal of gender-specific barriers in access to services and the multiple biases embedded in their delivery, including changes in the incentive structures, performance measures and accountability reviews of decision makers, bureaucrats and frontline workers.

In all, the contributions to this volume remind us that “no dimension of development is gender-neutral” (Moro-Coco and Raaber 2012:4). Their exploration of the gendered effects of development processes, policies and practices suggests that the current context requires a major rethink and that this rethink needs to go in both directions. On the one hand, the dominant development paradigm needs to change in order to create more conducive conditions for achieving gender equality and women's rights. The fact that macroeconomic stability continues to constitute the boundary within which social development is discussed and envisioned clearly conspires against the realization of these goals. In a different world, social justice and human well-being would be the starting point of development endeavours, and macroeconomic policy would be judged in terms of its contribution to this agenda. On the other hand, gender equality and women's rights need to be at the core of any development alternative that aspires to overcome the current impasse. This requires greater attention to hitherto neglected issues, including the gender division of labour within households, which continues to place a disproportionate burden on women. It also includes a much more determined promotion of women's

rights to bodily integrity and reproductive choice as part and parcel of social development. Within this broader endeavour, explicit attention to context-specific manifestations of gender inequality and pathways to women's empowerment is primary. This implies granting a central role to women's organizations that tend to be closer to the reality on the ground. Their substantive and meaningful participation is essential to any (re)definition of development goals and practices: it is through their struggle that entrenched inequalities and power structures are opened up to contestation, and it is through their claims that gender justice and women's empowerment are filled with political meaning.

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**PART I**

**GENDERING DEVELOPMENT:  
INSTITUTIONS, POLICIES, PROCESSES**

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## Chapter 1

# Is There a Crisis in the Family?<sup>1</sup>

*Henrietta Moore*<sup>2</sup>

(1994)

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### Introduction

Is the family in crisis? There is a widespread perception at the present time that something has gone wrong with the family. High rates of divorce, increased marital conflict and the escalating costs of welfare programmes, coupled with rising crime, drug taking and antisocial behaviour among the young, are all taken as evidence that the family and the social values on which it is based are in decline. How accurate is this picture? Does it reflect a form of “moral panic” rather than a description of an empirical situation?

Historians and social scientists have documented many instances in different societies at various times of what they term “moral panic”. These moments of crisis in what are perceived as deeply rooted and firmly held cultural and social values have often occurred in periods of transition and rapid social change. The extent to which such crises accurately reflect changing circumstances is questionable, since they often appear to be part of a response to change rather than an instigator of it. However, it is clear that many countries and communities at the present time sense their social and cultural values to be under threat from a diverse range of social, economic and political changes that appear both interconnected and global in their spread.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine what these global processes might be and how they are affecting family forms, gender relations and family-market linkages. Globalization, increasing market integration and the changing nature of labour markets are identified as the macroeconomic forces that act as sources of pressure and produce strain on intra-household resource allocation, conjugal relations, childcare and socialization. In the context of increasingly unified and deregulated markets for capital and labour, people within vulnerable countries and those within vulnerable groups have

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<sup>1</sup> *Is There a Crisis in the Family?* was published as an UNRISD Occasional Paper (UNRISD, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing, Henrietta Moore was Reader in Social Anthropology at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

to maintain family relations and livelihoods from a diminished resource base. This chapter identifies the care of children and the reproduction of human capital as the main issues to be addressed by those interested in the family, and it sets out the reasons for and the benefits of such an approach.

### **What Is the Family and How Has It Changed Historically?**

No attempt can be made to analyse the family without some discussion of the existing variability in family forms and responsibilities, and the manner in which different social systems and ideologies of family life encode particular definitions of the rights, needs and responsibilities of individuals within families. Any argument about a crisis in family forms or a decline in family values necessarily involves some consideration of how families have weathered crisis in the past, and of how different kinds of families have responded to difficulties. This section considers some of the problems involved in trying to define “the family”.

If we take the issue of variability seriously, it is clear that there is no such thing as *the* family, only families. Family forms vary not only historically and culturally but also within any one context. It makes little sense therefore to talk of *the* Japanese family or *the* Ghanaian family. From a historical perspective, it has been demonstrated convincingly for early modern Europe, for example, that the nature of the family, and its relationship to the household, varied extensively even within individual regions of Europe, and that no single evolutionary trajectory for the family (for example, from an extended to a nuclear form) can be demonstrated over time.<sup>3</sup> Family/household forms also vary with the life stages and social strategies of their members. In consequence, different types of families/households exist alongside each other in any particular context, and individual families will pass through a variety of different forms during the various stages of their development.

The relationship between the family and the household is always something that requires detailed social and historical analysis. While recruitment to households is usually through kinship and marriage, these units are not necessarily the same as families. This is particularly clear in the context of Africa, for example, where production, reproduction, consumption and socialization may be spread across several households, and where separate conjugal income streams mean that relations within domestic units are more likely to be characterized by bargaining and negotiation than by sharing. What is important about such households is that they do not form closed “family economies” where household members have equal access to pooled resources, and they cannot therefore be treated as autonomous units for the purposes of social development and welfare policies. In a wide variety of communities and societies, households and families are not coterminous, nor do they overlap completely. Family members may be spread across several households, and household units can contain individuals who are not part of the unit comprising the

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<sup>3</sup> While it is now generally thought, for example, that the English family has been nuclear in form for a very long time and that no easy relationship between increasing nuclearization and industrialization can be posited, it would be a mistake to imagine that this picture is an invariant one. Anderson’s (1971) research on mid-nineteenth century Lancashire showed that kin helped each other, particularly in times of crisis, by living together for periods of time, and Willmott and Young (1962) found much the same situation in London in the 1950s. Households in both cases were therefore extended rather than nuclear. For a review of the literature on the development of the family in Europe and a discussion of these issues, see Kertzer 1991.

conjugal couple and their children.<sup>4</sup> Families and households should thus not be treated as identical entities, and the degree of congruence between them will always require empirical specification. This issue of definition is crucial because many recent analyses of the crisis in the family and of the rising cost of dysfunctional families to the state tend to assume all too readily that the autonomous nuclear family is the model for the family worldwide and that family members must necessarily be co-resident and cooperating. This assumption ignores the fact that domestic units, whatever their composition and form, are rooted in social networks that provide support and solidarity, as well as the exchange of goods and services. It also obscures the extent to which such units are divided by different interests, resource allocations and power differentials.

Questions of resources within families/households always have to be seen in the context of rights, needs and obligations. The management of resources, including labour and income, has a direct impact on family/household organization, the sexual division of labour, and expectations about roles and relationships. Families are not entities or agents in themselves. They are made up of individuals who pass through a number of life stages, each one of which will be closely connected to ideas about what is expected of them and what is due to them. Consequently, any analysis of the family has to take into account the very different experiences of family life that individuals have. Definitions of parent, wife, husband and child vary considerably from one context to another and the expectations and experiences of these roles also differ. One obvious example here is the way in which notions of childhood vary. Few middle-class Americans, for example, would have any intention of sending their seven-year-old out to work in a factory, let alone asking him or her to undertake childcare responsibilities and domestic tasks on which the rest of the household depended.

One of the major difficulties in analysing families and households is that the expectations surrounding intimate living and domestic life can often be at odds with circumstances. The ideology of family life may have relatively little to do with people's actual situation. In the United Kingdom, the ideology of the nuclear family is still very powerful, but the number of individuals resident in such units is only about a quarter of the population. Ideals about the behaviour of women, men and children are a feature of all societies, and while these ideals do change, in situations where they become impossible to fulfil, for whatever reason, conflict can be the result. Increasing levels of marital conflict, and a corresponding rise in divorce rates, are causing concern. However, it is often very difficult to separate out the empirical reality from people's perception of it. One possibility is that marital conflict may appear to have increased dramatically because it has now become a focus of concern and is being emphasized in research findings. Another possibility is that because divorce rates are rising in some contexts, partly due to changes in legislation, individuals feel more insecure within marriage. This insecurity could be of many different kinds, but one noticeable feature of recent research, for example, is the frequency with which men are reported to express dissatisfaction with their wives' behaviour. The increasing number of women working outside the household leads to complaints about insufficient attention to domestic tasks and child discipline, as well as to accusations about women's inappropriate expectations in life. These complaints are basically about women failing to fulfil ideal notions of wife and mother. This does not mean that women fulfilled these notions in the past—women in many contexts have been

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<sup>4</sup> One obvious example is the practice of child fostering, common in Africa and Latin America, where families send a child to relatives, sometimes a married sibling, but often more distant kin, so that they can be fed, clothed and educated.

working outside the home for a very long time—but it does imply that social and economic changes have created situations where the interests and needs of all individuals cannot easily be met within the domestic unit.

### ***How different is the present from the past?***

The issue of the extent to which family relations have changed feeds into the current question about whether the “crisis in the family” is a crisis, and whether or not it is likely to be mortal. Recent debates about the family have revealed a split between those who claim that the current diversity of family forms is nothing new and those who say that there is a breakdown in the family and the origins of this breakdown are to be located in a collapse of value systems. In the light of this division, it is necessary to try and specify what, if any, are the changes that contemporary families are facing that were not faced by families in the past.

One of the key determinants of family forms and household composition is demography. Fertility and mortality rates are crucial in this regard, and it is clear that current levels of population growth, combined with improvements in mother and infant mortality rates, are unprecedented. However, there are gross disparities between countries with regard to population growth and mortality rates—both of which are closely correlated with, but not straightforwardly determined by, economic opportunity and welfare provision. Improved life expectancy, particularly in industrialized countries, has altered household composition, as some individuals now have to care for elderly parents as well as children. In some industrialized countries, changes in age at marriage and improved participation in the labour market for women, as well as other factors, have led to a substantial rise in the number of cohabiting couples and single-person households. However, these increases, at least for the United Kingdom, are the result of comparisons with data from earlier decades in the twentieth century. Before the 1800s, significant numbers of individuals never married and either lived alone or with other single persons. Cohabiting may not have been common in the past for the middle and upper classes, but it was certainly very common for working class women and men.

It does seem evident that divorce rates are rising, but for many developing countries there are no good data on divorce rates for earlier periods. Modern statistics on divorce rates have to be correlated with changing legal and customary definitions of marriage, in order to be certain that divorce rates are not rising simply because marriage rates are. Current debates on the family in Europe and the United States stress that divorce has an adverse effect on children, and many argue that children from “broken homes” are likely to do less well at school and exhibit antisocial behaviour of a variety of sorts. However, divorce is not the sole cause of broken homes and stepfamilies. In the past in Europe—and at the present time in some developing countries in spite of improved life expectancy—many families are broken by death. Significant numbers of those who are widowed *do* remarry—although widowers remarry much more quickly than widows—and establish new households. In many parts of the world at the moment, parental death and orphanhood are on the increase because of armed conflict.

Significant and unprecedented changes have been brought about in family forms and household composition through migration and urbanization. Labour migration has meant that many households, particularly in developing countries, are *de facto*, if not *de jure*, headed by women who have to provide for their children and for household reproduction, often in the absence of regular or substantial remittances. Female labour migration has increased markedly in recent years, and this is tied to the opportunities for

women both in the informal sector of the urban economy and in wage labour in certain enterprises, including textiles and electronics. Women who migrate to urban areas often leave one or more of their children with their own mother, thus creating households without resident wage-earners. In parts of Africa, for example, households comprising grandparents and grandchildren are on the increase not only because of labour migration but also because of the ravages of AIDS.

The size of urban centres has grown massively all over the world during this century.<sup>5</sup> Increasing numbers of individuals are dependent on waged employment or informal sector activities for their livelihoods. The very rapid rate of population growth in the developing nations has meant that fewer people are able to earn their living on the land, and resources of all kinds are under increasing pressure. Urban poverty is now a phenomenon on a large scale; whether it is worse than the poverty of nineteenth century London or nineteenth century Shanghai is not known. What is clear is that immiseration and deprivation are on the increase, and that in this process women and children—in part because of their relative disadvantage in labour markets—are especially vulnerable. The large numbers of children living on the streets in cities all over the world—combined with rising crime, increasing substance abuse and lack of education—are symbolic for many of the crisis in the family.

The size of populations and the scale of migration and urbanization are without precedent but, given the effect of the market and wage labour rates on family forms, a further factor needs consideration. The extent of globalization and the degree of market integration have provided a political and economic context for the current changes in family/household relations that is quite unlike anything that has preceded it. Progressive market integration has led to increasing differentiation both between and within countries. Processes of social and economic differentiation have intensified along lines of gender, race and class with potentially disastrous effects for certain groups within populations.

### ***Is there a “moral panic” about the family?***

As soon as this question is posed, it becomes apparent that there can be no answer to it. Whose family is being referred to, and who exactly is suffering from panic? It seems that much of the panic, but by no means all of it, is located in Europe and the United States, and in international institutions. There is a particular irony in the fact that this crisis in values, if that is what it is, is occurring at a moment when the globalization of technology and the media is ensuring that a very specific Euro-American model of gender, family and intimate relations is being marketed worldwide. The enormous popularity all over the world of Euro-American soap operas, for example, can be accounted for, in part, by the heady mix they offer of intimate relations under pressure combined with consumption and property transfer strategies designed to ensure social and familial continuity. This mix is a feature of locally produced soap operas as well as of internationally marketed ones, but it is only one of many ways in which the changing aspirations of individuals are bound up with new consumption possibilities.

The ubiquity of the West's cultural productions and the enshrinement of key sets of dominant values associated with the West in the thinking and practices of global institutions are perceived as undesirable and neo-imperialistic by a variety of countries and groups in the world. Many Muslim countries, for example, do not seem to be

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<sup>5</sup> For a review of the data on urbanization in developing countries, see Kasarda and Crenshaw 1991.

suffering a crisis in the family; they rather see their family forms and values as providing moral guidance and coherence within a specific project of modernity. They do not believe that the West's path to modernity, social development and economic growth is the only one, or that it is a particularly desirable one. It could be argued that a similar situation exists in China, where the public discourse on the family is one that emphasizes the strengths and abilities of the Chinese family. The dominant discourse at the present time is one that focuses on the links between the family and the success of market reform.

What makes it difficult to analyse such discourses is that they are public and often produced by the state and/or elite groups, and it is not clear how well they correspond to local understandings and experiences of family life. It is clear, however, that public discourses of this kind do influence the way people think, even in situations where people are not in total agreement with them. They also have a marked effect on social policies, including welfare provisions and taxation systems.

It has been argued by some that the current perception of crisis in the family has been largely brought about by those governments and international agencies that are seeking to redefine the boundaries between the state, the family and the market because of the increasing cost of welfare provision. Both Europe and the United States have a long history of "crises" in the family that tend to occur at moments of transition and change. These "crises" are typified by an anxiety about women working outside the home, coupled with a worry about child provision and socialization. We know that family forms and the social values associated with them do change over time and that these changes produce anxieties in all societies, anxieties that under certain circumstances become articulated as "crisis". But the perception of crisis, and the moral panic that sometimes accompanies it, cannot simply be dismissed as false or epiphenomenal, for such a perception may well bring real changes in its wake. We do, therefore, seriously need to address the question of whether there is a crisis in the family, and we need to do so for a number of reasons. First, there is the undoubted fact that a *perception* of crisis is affecting people's experience of and response to present changes—at least in certain countries. Second, the consensus in thinking that is emerging in some quarters is having a clear effect on policy formation in international institutions. This is also evident in some national policies. Third, there are important social and economic changes taking place that are having a significant impact on family/household forms and on people's survival strategies and livelihood options. Fourth, any new set of policies emanating from international institutions and affecting family life is likely to prove very divisive because different nation states and interest groups will not find it easy to establish common agendas appropriate to their needs, and some will fear that their interests will be subsumed by those of others.

In the following sections, some of the major socioeconomic changes affecting family/household forms and people's livelihood options are discussed, and consequences for policy are outlined.

### **The Feminization of Poverty**

One major recent change in family/household structure that has attracted much comment has been the reported rise in the proportion of households headed by women. The reasons for this increase, like its rate and magnitude, are diverse, but it is a trend that has been noted for many different countries in the world at varying stages of economic



development. The debate on the origins and causes of female-headed households has been clouded by a number of assumptions, one of which is that it is a new phenomenon.

Historically, a rise in female-headed households has been associated with rapid economic development, very often under the impact of slavery and colonial rule. By the mid-eighteenth century in the Caribbean, for example, a distinctive marriage pattern had emerged where strict rules of marriage applied in the propertied classes, but common-law marriage or implicit contracts were typical among the black and mestizo populations. Many children were born outside marriage and a large percentage of households were headed by women (Folbre 1991:24). This situation had much to do with the impact of slavery on family forms and reproduction strategies, because of the desire of slave owners to promote high female fertility rates outside the context of marriage. Historically, such conditions for the reproduction of labour can be contrasted with those where individual men work for wages, for example, where stronger conjugal contracts and lower fertility rates are more likely.

The large proportion of children born outside marriage and the increased percentage of female-headed households were commented on in eighteenth century Brazil and well documented in the nineteenth century. In São Paulo in 1802, 45 per cent of all urban households were headed by women, and in 1836 the percentage was 39. In the interior of Brazil in the early nineteenth century, 25 per cent of households were estimated to be headed by women (Folbre 1994). These figures are to be contrasted with levels of female headship of around 14.5 per cent for Brazil as a whole in the 1980s. Low occupational status and a non-European racial or ethnic background increased the likelihood of a woman maintaining a family on her own. However, the intersections of gender, race and class did not always produce the same outcome. In Mexico City in the eighteenth century, Spanish women were more likely than Indian or caste women to head households. This may have been due to a higher average age at marriage and greater incidence of widowhood, or to the high cost of housing in the city. But upper class parents concerned about intergenerational property transfers and status sometimes also discouraged marriage in difficult economic times (Folbre 1991:25).

It is evident that the number of female-headed households is related to marriage strategies, property and inheritance transfers, and the intersection between production systems and the reproduction of labour. This means that it is unwise to treat female headship as a unitary phenomenon. The very definition of headship complicates the picture because of the variable relationship between economic provision, decision making and power/authority structures. Women, for example, are rarely classified as heads even when they are the major economic providers if there is a male over 15 in the household, while men are frequently designated as the head even when they are not the major provider. The idea that the definition of female headship is unproblematic has been another assumption that has impeded analysis.

One significant cause of the rise in female-headed households in developing countries is labour migration. Out-migration is on the increase as disparities between rural and urban locations, and between countries, become more marked. While significant and growing numbers of women migrate, the general growth in migration figures will be reflected in the number of women left to care for children and maintain household reproduction without the help of a spouse. However, it is important to distinguish between those households where male labour migration has resulted in female headship, and those where women are involved in polygynous marriage or have been abandoned or become divorced, separated or widowed. It is equally crucial to note that

many households will pass through a phase of female headship during their developmental cycle because of migration, divorce and subsequent remarriage or a subsequent marriage by the husband. The analysis of female headship thus needs to be closely tied to an examination of life cycles, marital strategies and labour deployment.

A third assumption that has complicated the analysis of female-headed households is the association of such households with poverty, and the long-term consequences this might have for the welfare of women and children. It seems clear that overall processes of economic decline and changes in the structure of labour markets have made certain categories of households particularly vulnerable. However, there have been relatively few attempts to investigate the consequences for family welfare of different types of female-headed households, or to analyse the effects of headship on particular socioeconomic categories of households.

A case study from Ghana (see box 1.1) shows that an increase in the proportion of female-headed households does not necessarily indicate a growing concentration of poverty among women, but it does suggest their increasing primary economic responsibility and their growing vulnerability. Moreover, the straightforward assumption that poverty is always associated with female-headed households is dangerous both because it leaves the causes and nature of poverty unexamined and because it rests on a prior assumption that children will be consistently worse off in such households because they represent incomplete families. There are a number of points to be made here. First, there is overwhelming evidence that resources under the control of women are more likely to be devoted to children than are resources in the hands of men.<sup>6</sup> Thomas (1990) found that income in the hands of Brazilian women increased the health and survival chances of their children, and that it had an effect on child health almost 20 times greater than income controlled by the father. Nutrition data from the northern province of Zambia show that children under five in female-headed households are less likely to be malnourished than children in slightly better-off households where both parents are resident. The reasons for this have to do with women's improved access to childcare and to networks of sharing within female-headed households (Moore and Vaughan 1994). The available data suggest that the income that poorer women earn can lead to higher health and social benefits than the income men earn (World Bank 1993).

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<sup>6</sup> Dwyer and Bruce 1988; Haaga and Mason 1987; Kennedy 1992; Buvinić et al. 1992.

**Box 1.1: Female headship and poverty**

Household composition in Ghana reflects a situation where lineage ties are strong and conjugal bonds relatively weak, and where a significant number of production and consumption activities take place outside the household. In this context, the household has been characterized as “a loosely knit set of overlapping economies” in which conflict between the head and other household members over the division of labour and the intra-household distribution of resources is a frequent occurrence (Lloyd and Gage-Brandon 1993:117).<sup>a</sup> In such a situation, women’s best interests lie in maximizing their access to and control over resources for their own support and that of their children.

However, larger households with adults of both sexes have improved access to cash income as well as lower dependency ratios.<sup>b</sup> It is also evident that women’s overall access to income and labour is improved through co-residence with men, particularly spouses, because women suffer discrimination with regard to their access to land, capital, education and credit. Some women may have no choice except to become a household head—particularly those who are widowed, divorced or who became lone mothers when very young—but it should not be assumed that membership of a female-headed household is always a disadvantage for women or necessarily deleterious for child welfare (Lloyd and Gage-Brandon 1993:118).

**Table 1.1: Expenditure levels for different categories of female- and male-headed households in Ghana**

	Male-headed		Female-headed	
	15–59	60+	15–59	60+
Expenditure (cedis/year)	51,542	40,941	53,477	43,774
Equivalence scale-adjusted expenditure (cedis/year)*	87,346	65,932	98,065	72,519
Percentage of households in lowest expenditure quartile	23.7	38.0	19.4	32.1
Percentage of budget spent on food	69.6	73.2	71.4	74.0
Percentage of households that receive remittances	17.9	30.9	53.1	66.3
Percentage of households that send remittances	52.2	35.8	46.2	27.5
Net remittances as a percentage of total household expenditure	–0.8	0.8	6.2	8.2

**Note:** \*Equivalence scales used by the World Bank for analysis of the Ghana Living Standard Survey (GLSS) data are 0.2 for age 0–6, 0.3 for ages 7–12, and 0.5 for ages 13–17. **Source:** Adapted from Lloyd and Gage-Brandon 1993.

The above table shows that on average female-headed households in Ghana are no worse off and indeed slightly less likely to be found in the lowest quartile of the income distribution. The percentage of total budget allocated to food is often given as an indicator of relative poverty. Lloyd and Gage-Brandon (1993:122, fn28) argue that because female-headed households spend more on food than male-headed ones, even at the higher income levels, something other than income may be determining the level of food expenditure. One possibility is that women allocate a larger proportion of their resources to feeding their children. If female-headed households do spend more on food at any particular income level than male-headed ones, the use of the proportion of income spent on food as an indicator of poverty may lead to an overestimation of the percentage of female-headed households among the poor.

**Notes:** <sup>a</sup> Whitehead (1994) shows that men’s authority within the household and kin group includes the allocation of household labour and the contribution of wives to the family farm/business. <sup>b</sup> Dependency ratios are defined as the number of resident productive adults in a household compared to the number of dependants (children, elderly, sick). **Source:** The analysis is based on data from the Ghana Living Standard Survey (GLSS) from 1987/1988.

To argue that the position of female-headed households is complex and internally differentiated (see box 1.2) is not to deny the validity of data from around the world that show them to be disadvantaged with respect to property, capital, income and credit. Many such households exist in the context of nation states that are rolling back their boundaries and pushing more “social care” into the arena of the family. This phenomenon provides a particularly graphic demonstration of the way in which women are expected to carry a disproportionate share of the costs of childcare and social reproduction, and to do so often from a diminished resource base. Furthermore, the distribution of the costs of social reproduction—caring for children, the elderly and the sick—is inequitable within family/household units. As Nancy Folbre argues, the distribution of income and labour time within families is an important determinant of economic growth and welfare, and yet it has remained largely unmeasured and unexamined because of the persistent tendency to analyse families as undifferentiated and altruistic units (Folbre 1983, 1986, 1991). In all societies, the family contributes a very

large share of the time and money devoted to social reproduction, that is, the production and maintenance of “human capital” (Folbre 1991:3-4). The unequal distribution of income and labour within the family means that women carry a disproportionate burden of the costs of the reproduction of that capital.

<b>Box 1.2: Internal differentiation of female-headed households</b>				
Lloyd and Gage-Brandon’s work reveals that there are significant differences between categories of female-headed households in Ghana.				
<b>Table 1.2: Consumption and remittance levels for different categories of female- and male-headed households</b>				
	Male-headed		Female-headed	
	15-59	60+	15-59	60+
Equivalence scale-adjusted consumption (cedis/year)				
• Married	87,314	64,966	106,823	61,112
• Divorced/separated	86,095 <sup>a</sup>	72,671 <sup>a</sup>	100,839	78,473
• Widowed			76,268	76,739
Percentage receiving remittances				
• Married	17.6	31.3	62.5	74.9
• Divorced/separated	35.7 <sup>a</sup>	67.4 <sup>a</sup>	23.3	25.0
• Widowed			40.5	62.9
Net remittances as a percentage of total expenditure				
• Married	-0.8	0.8	8.8	11.0
• Divorced/separated	2.3 <sup>a</sup>	4.5 <sup>a</sup>	-1.6	0.7
• Widowed			1.3	8.4
<b>Note:</b> <sup>a</sup> For male-headed households, divorced/separated and widowed are combined due to small sample sizes. <b>Source:</b> Lloyd and Gage-Brandon 1993.				
Households headed by married women are best off and those headed by widows worst off, with the households of divorced women in an intermediate position. The percentage of households receiving remittances shows that non-co-resident spouses have more economic commitments than ex-spouses. However, the figures in box 1.1 reveal that over 40 per cent of female-headed households in the 15-59 age range actually send remittances elsewhere and the data from table 1.2 indicate that remittances only make up a small percentage of total expenditure for female-headed households. This does not mean that remittances are not crucial. Indeed, for some households they may make the difference between being able to survive and not being able to do so.				
The figures show that widows are at a particular disadvantage—presumably because of the discrimination they suffer in inheritance systems where they do not acquire rights to the land and property of their spouses. It is noticeable that, as women get older, married heads no longer have a relative advantage. This may be because spouses are no longer contributing to their support. In Ghana, women often “retire” from marriage as they get older, and their spouses may be supporting younger wives with dependent children (Lloyd and Gage-Brandon 1993:124-125).				

Women’s particular responsibility for the reproduction of human capital is often reflected in the way they are held to be primarily responsible for child welfare and for any intergenerational transfer of disadvantage. Much of the recent research on single mothers shows that their lack of resources—including poor education—contributes to increased levels of child mortality and delinquency, and decreasing levels of educational attainment and life opportunities for their children. The easy elision between female heads of households, teenage pregnancies and dysfunctional families works to make these linkages seem obvious and predetermined. Aggregate figures and generalized categories, such as “teenage mother” and “lone parent”, exacerbate this tendency. Premature parenthood, for example, does appear to be increasing in many developing countries (PRB 1992), and when it is associated with low educational attainment, low rates of marriage, low wages and low levels of property inheritance and transfer, it will also be associated with poverty. But, to speak of women in such circumstances as being responsible for the intergenerational transfer of poverty and/or disadvantage to their children is more than disingenuous. For one thing, it implies that the individual is to be held accountable and

that she is somehow at fault for not bringing her children up in a “proper” family. This places the responsibility firmly on the individual for her failure to achieve economic and social security, and effectively prevents a thorough analysis of the causes and consequences of poverty. Teenage pregnancy does not cause poverty, however strongly it may be correlated with it under certain circumstances.

Focusing on women in the case of premature mothers and lone parents reveals the extent to which women are held to be responsible for child welfare in a way that men are not. In fact, the reported rise in teenage pregnancies in Africa, for example, may indicate that it is the young men who are refusing to marry. The reasons for this are diverse, but perhaps the most significant factor is that under conditions of economic decline, and where family labour cannot contribute directly to production, the cost of children has become too great. This is particularly the case where male employment opportunities and wage levels are also in decline. Increasing numbers of men are finding that they cannot support families and that marriage acts as a net drain on their own meagre resources. Even among middle-class families, it has become evident that some men are using their greater bargaining power within the household to renegotiate the distribution of responsibilities so that women shoulder a greater proportion of the costs of child rearing and welfare. This means that where women are able to earn an income, they may find that they are forced to take on the cost of the running of the household, while the husband retains his own income for other purposes (Dwyer and Bruce 1988).

## **Welfare Dependency and the Dysfunctional Family**

This section examines the current debate about the rising cost to the state of dysfunctional families; it argues that this debate ignores the structural reasons for the increasing impoverishment of some families, preferring instead an approach that favours individual responsibility. One consequence of this is that the problem is being formulated as one about families and the failure of individuals within them, rather than directing attention to employment.

Historically, poverty has been viewed as a problem about work. Those who are poor either do not work enough, choose not to work or are unable to do so. Recent debates about the rising cost of welfare provision to disadvantaged households, particularly in Europe and the United States, have effectively treated the family unit as an individual and linked its poor performance in the areas of economic provisioning, socialization and child welfare to a failure to carry out its functions properly. This permits an easy slippage in thinking that links costs to the state with poor performance on the part of the family unit, and establishes that poor performance as an instance of individual failure—failure to be a complete nuclear unit based on a co-resident conjugal couple.

It is this individualized rather than structural approach to the complex interrelations between the state, the market and the family that has given rise to particular arguments about welfare dependency. The very term “dependency” implies that what families, like individuals, should be is autonomous and self-reliant. It is clearly desirable that parents should be able to earn enough to support themselves and their children. However, it is thoroughly misleading to imply that the goal of better-off families is to be completely autonomous and self-reliant. This immediately becomes apparent if we consider the question of the care of the elderly. Middle-class families in the United Kingdom, for example, are often unwilling to bear the full cost of the care of elderly

parents and insist on the state doing so in spite of the fact that the cost of caring for elderly people who are sick or infirm greatly exceeds any contribution they may have made to the state through taxes and other means during their working lives. What distinguishes debates about the elderly from those about single mothers and unemployed youth is that the former are held to have worked to make a contribution, while the latter have not. For all their sophistication, the arguments are little more than those about the relationship between the deserving and the undeserving poor. This is again evident in the discourse on single mothers. In the boom decades after the Second World War, women—and especially mothers—were thought to be exempt from working outside the home. The fact that during this period many married women were engaged in waged employment altered neither the perception nor the policies that perception informed and reinforced. Part of the present problem is that the numbers of the poor have been increased dramatically by individuals—women and children—who were previously thought to be exempt from work. The result in Europe and the United States has been an increasingly vituperative debate concerning single mothers and welfare dependency that has relied for its emotional force, if not its efficacy, on an older contention about poverty and its relationship to a failure of work effort (Harris 1993).

The idea that women receiving welfare benefits do not want to work—like the image popular in the United Kingdom of girls who get pregnant in order to receive the benefits due to single parents—has been reinforced by the increase in the number of married women with young children who are working. In the United States, for example, nearly 60 per cent of women with children under two years of age work (Harris 1993). To claim that single mothers with children are dependent on welfare has become just another way of saying that they are avoiding work. Sympathetic commentators have remarked that work incentives built into welfare programmes have not been successful largely because individuals have been placed in low-wage jobs that do not improve skills and provide insufficient income to support a family. Work cannot, therefore, offer an easy exit point from welfare dependency for all women.

However, a recent study of women on welfare in the United States found that they do work in spite of disincentives in the form of lost benefits, and that at any one time about 30 per cent of welfare mothers are working and that during any period on welfare about 50 per cent of all single mothers have some contact with the labour market (Harris 1993). But human capital and wage levels are crucial determinants. Those women most likely to earn their way out of welfare were those with higher educational levels and previous work histories, while those who had not invested in education and had many children remained on welfare for longer periods. According to Harris (1993), it is the number of children a woman has and not the constraints of having young children at home that is significant. She found that when a woman had three or more children, her chances of getting off welfare by taking a job were reduced by 50 per cent as compared to a woman with one or two children. However, the study did show that work provided the dominant route off welfare since 66 per cent of all welfare spells ended when the woman was employed. Women with fewer educational resources did not experience rapid job exits, but if they remained in the workforce they tended to work their way off welfare once their work experience could command higher wages. This suggests that, among poor women, investments in education bring better returns than investments in work experience. In sum, the differences in human capital and family size are what mattered most in getting women off welfare, suggesting that if the goal of government policies is to get single mothers off welfare, then it is investments in human capital—in the form of

education and training—that will bring the most benefits; the lack of work effort is not the cause of the problem, nor are dysfunctional families. Single mothers have frequent contact with the labour force, and they combine or substitute work and welfare as alternative sources of income in order to provide for their families. In short, they rely on welfare when they cannot find jobs that pay enough to support their children.

## The Costs of Children<sup>7</sup>

The overall cost of supporting children is one thing, but from the point of view of family welfare what is important is the distribution of those costs between parents and the pattern of their overall contributions. This section examines these issues and argues that women bear a disproportionate share of the costs of childcare and socialization, and therefore of the reproduction of human capital. The key question here is: “what are or should be the consequences for policy of recognizing that women shoulder a larger proportion of the costs of reproducing the human capital on which future economic prosperity may well depend, and that they do so from a diminishing resource base in many instances?”

An important determinant of the cost of children is the level of contributions they will make as they mature (Caldwell 1982). These contributions may be in the form of labour time, waged income, remittances and support in old age. The perceived level of these potential contributions influences fertility and investment (including in school fees) decisions. However, another important determinant of the cost of children is the contributions that will be made by society as a whole, including health care, education and family allowances. When the levels and nature of both forms of contribution are considered along with the distribution of the costs of childcare between parents, a clear distortion emerges.

Several studies from a variety of countries have shown that mothers work longer hours, consume less and devote more of their resources to their children.<sup>8</sup> The commitments that women make to motherhood reduce their earnings, labour market experience, promotional prospects and general potential for economic independence (Folbre 1991). Women, as mentioned earlier, carry a disproportionate share of the costs of child rearing and the reproduction of human capital. But do they recoup those costs in particular ways? It has been argued that under certain conditions of production and reproduction in the developing world, with a strict division of labour and defined cultural expectations, women are partially recompensed in two ways. First, regulations governing kinship and marriage clearly set out men’s responsibilities to dependants. Second, women can expect economic contributions from their children (Nugent 1985; Cain 1982).

But, as Folbre (1991) argues, increases in the cost of children due to processes of modernization and market integration have intensified the economic stresses on families. The rising costs of family life have intensified conjugal conflict and negotiation, rendering women in some contexts even more vulnerable in consequence of the unequal distribution of power in conjugal unions. This augments the probability of individuals renegeing on formalized contracts such as marriage, and on informal contracts such as

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<sup>7</sup> My argument in this section and in those that follow is based on the work of Nancy Folbre (1991, 1994) from whom I take my understanding and inspiration.

<sup>8</sup> Dwyer and Bruce 1988; Sen 1983; Folbre 1986.

expectations of support for kin, elderly parents and other household members. Children and the elderly are increasingly unable to participate in a wage-based economy, where education is crucial, and they become more vulnerable to poverty. In this situation, parenting becomes a commitment with many costs and potentially few rewards. Each case must be analysed in specific terms, but what is evident is that in these sorts of circumstances women are no longer receiving any recompense—or they are receiving very little—for the disproportionate costs of child nurturing and rearing that they bear.

It is not possible to make global generalizations about family structure, family law and welfare policy. But, in almost all contexts, women are assigned primary responsibility for child rearing and public transfers (pensions, family allowances) are often structured so as to provide benefits to waged employees and to reinforce a family structure based on a male breadwinner (Folbre 1991). The result is that social security programmes discriminate against female wage earners in spite of attempts in many countries to reform the law (Brocas et al. 1990), and they do so in a situation where women are already discriminated against in the labour market. Part of the explanation lies in the fact that levels of family benefits are quite low in relation to other public transfers. Working women pay the same level of taxes as men and thus contribute equally to total public transfers, but the proportion of such transfers reallocated to family benefits is relatively small in a situation where women are still bearing a disproportionate share of the costs of childcare. Benefit levels and welfare legislation vary enormously around the world, but women who are raising families on their own are not receiving sufficient support compared to families with a male breadwinner. A review of current social insurance programmes in Latin America and the Caribbean concluded that such programmes subsidize children in families headed by full-time wage earners, effectively redistributing money away from most families maintained by women alone (Folbre 1994). Female-headed households might represent a significant proportion of the state's welfare bill in some contexts; this is not because they form dysfunctional families, but because they are bearing the full costs of child rearing and nurturing in systems where public transfers do not adequately address the fact that all women shoulder a disproportionate share of the burden of social reproduction.

### **Fathers, Husbands and Conjugal Expectations**

Certain critics of welfare policy have argued that welfare programmes provide perverse incentives and increase marital dissolution. As Nancy Folbre (1991) points out, economic development and fertility decline have historically been accompanied by increases in the percentage of female-headed households and by institutional changes that redistribute some of the costs of social reproduction from families to society as a whole. Welfare programmes, then, are the result of these changes and not the cause of them, and there is no evidence to suggest that providing benefits to families increases marital instability. Critics sometimes argue that welfare programmes are a form of unproductive spending, but this is rarely more than a way of arguing that the cost of welfare provision is too high. It is evident, however, that women's ability to support their families, whether they are married or not, would be greatly enhanced by improving their position in the labour market and instituting education and training programmes. Such an initiative would also have benefits for child health, nutrition and education. Family programmes should really be treated as employment programmes in the widest sense.



In view of the fact that women *do* shoulder a disproportionate share of the costs of childcare and human capital reproduction, it is ironic that debates about female-headed households inevitably focus on why women end up in this situation. The implication is that the women themselves are responsible for an increase in marital instability and that this may be connected to growing numbers of women in waged work and/or to changes in role expectations and attitudes. As mentioned above, relatively little attention is given to fathers and to the role of men in changes in family structures and gender role expectations, even though quite a lot of research has been done in this area.

In the United States, 42 per cent of households were supported by a sole male breadwinner in 1960, but by 1988 the figure was down to 15 per cent (Wilkie 1991). The rise in female-headed households and the increase in the employment of married women are important factors in this change and they have been extensively studied. However, a third factor that has not been sufficiently investigated is equally important: the decline in the labour force participation of married men over the same period. This decline is connected to an increase in the percentage of men at the early family building stage whose income is not sufficient to support a family above the poverty level. The result has been an increase in the employment of wives and other family members, and a growth in the number of female-headed households and single parents. The decline in the male breadwinner role is greatest in men handicapped in the labour market by low education, minority status and older age (Wilkie 1991). The greatest employment opportunities since the 1970s have been in the low-wage jobs of the service sector and as a result have favoured women.

One very significant change in the United States, and one that is evident elsewhere in the world, is that the labour market demand for better educated workers has meant that the employment rate for young men with low education has declined markedly. Divisions along race lines have been particularly noticeable, with the gap between the labour participation rates of white as opposed to black and Hispanic men growing. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that rates of marriage among young men have declined.

**Table 1.3: Marriage rates for males, 1960s and 1980s, United States**

Men aged 20 to 24	Percentage married	
	Mid-1960s	Mid-1980s
White	48	24
Black	45	13

This decline in the rate of marriage for young men has been paralleled by a rise in the proportion of young mothers who do not marry before the birth of their first child. Among white women in the age group 15–29, the percentage with a premarital first birth rose from 8 in the mid-1960s to 20 in the mid-1980s. The figures for black women showed a comparable rise. This suggests that young mothers have little to gain financially from marrying the young fathers of their children, and it is also possible that those who do not marry may be better off in terms of higher educational attainment and lower fertility than those who do (Wilkie 1991). The data also show that some young men do not have the resources to marry and are apparently unwilling to take on the costs of a family commitment. One in five white and one in three black married men in the United States have earnings insufficient to support a family of four above the poverty level, and 60 per cent of white families have two or more wage earners (Wilkie 1991). A further study in the United States of teenage mothers on welfare and the fathers' involvement in childcare and support demonstrated that employment played an important role in the

young men's expression of fatherhood and in permitting them to be involved in the upbringing of their children (Danziger and Radin 1990). This supports the idea that joblessness is connected to the diminished family role of the father.

The causes of changes in family/household structure and increases in premarital pregnancies lie in structural factors rather than in individual preferences and proclivities or in failures of socialization and the pathology of dysfunctional families. These structural factors include changes in the national economy, increased market integration through globalization, and the responses of corporations and government to economic and social change. While it is true that the decline in men's ability to support a family is, and has been, an important factor in the rise of women's employment, there are a number of ways in which this might affect family structures. Historically in Europe and the United States, wives and children worked and contributed wages to family support simply because a family could not be supported on a single wage. Hence, married women's employment rates increased. This can be contrasted with the family wage systems prevalent in South-East Asia, where employment opportunities for young unmarried women have encouraged their increased participation in the labour force in circumstances where families cannot survive on a single male wage. The exact relationship between employment strategies and family/household structure varies depending on local gender ideologies, religious beliefs and kinship systems. In many cases, men prefer their young unmarried daughters to work rather than their wives, and in such situations married women's labour force participation can be relatively low. In these circumstances, women's labour force participation has no connection with increases in marital instability, and families can be strongly patriarchal and resistant to dissolution partly because of the need to maintain access to several wage incomes.

The question of whether or not women's involvement in waged work leads to an increased sense of independence, as well as improved decision-making roles in the household and changes in conjugal role expectations, is impossible to answer in comparative perspective. The empirical findings have been mixed, and it is difficult to know, for example, whether women divorce because they have the ability to be self-supporting or whether they enter the labour market when they recognize that their marriage is unsatisfactory. Recent data from Thailand—where women have a long history of employment and where the divorce rate is low but showing a modest rise—suggest that what little effect employment has is mediated by a whole set of factors relating to marital problems, wife abuse and poor relations between spouses. The picture is further complicated by the fact that 25 per cent of families in Bangkok are extended, and hence women may have help with domestic duties and childcare. Some women keep a shop at home or are craftworkers and can therefore integrate domestic and productive work more readily. The study concludes, however, by pointing out that although work might allow women to leave an unsatisfactory marriage, it certainly does not cause divorce (Edwards et al. 1992).

Divorce rates are on the rise in many countries of the world, but it is worth noting that this pattern is not a uniform one and that in many countries women are unable to divorce. There are also marked differences between rural and urban areas, and between individuals of different classes, religions and ethnic groups. The available data suggest that women suffer a significant loss of income at divorce, with reductions of 30–70 per cent from pre-divorce family income, while men's income tends to increase because they are no longer supporting dependants (Weitzman 1985; see also the discussion of Lloyd and Gage-Brandon's material above). The result is that divorce

and marital disruption have very different consequences for women and men. The reasons for increasing divorce rates have to be specified culturally and historically, and no single generalization could cover all the kinship and marital systems of the world. However, a number of critics have asserted that rising divorce rates are related to changing roles and expectations, and that, among many factors, increasing female participation in the labour force, greater mobility and modernization are to blame. These arguments are difficult to assess—especially in comparative perspective—because they are often based on assumptions about the negative effects of social change on what are thought to be key social relations and cultural values. What is evident is that critics frequently approach the problem of changing roles and expectations within marriages and families from an individual as opposed to a structural perspective.

Recent research in the South African homeland of Qwaqwa has produced evidence of high rates of premarital pregnancies, conjugal conflict and marital dissolution, accompanied by poor socialization of young males and rising levels of crime.<sup>9</sup> The reasons for this situation are a decline in male migrant labour and male employment generally, increasing social differentiation within the community, and the relocation of industries (clothing, glass and electronics) into the area to take advantage of cheap female labour and other incentives. The consequence of these changes is that household reproduction is more dependent on female income from beer brewing, petty trade and wage labour. Women report their husbands as saying that beer brewing is not an appropriate activity for respectably married women, and that domestic tasks and childcare are being neglected as a result of women working. Conjugal conflict over income and household decision making has been greatly exacerbated as men transfer their anxieties about the loss of their jobs and their declining contribution to household resources into the domestic domain. Women find themselves increasingly in the position of not being able to support the family on a male wage, and they continue to look for ways to generate income. There have been a number of violent clashes in the homeland where men have protested against the provision of jobs for women in the new industries—at their expense, as they see it. Conjugal roles and expectations are being forced to change, as women provide more of the income while partners are unemployed. Childcare, especially for women with young children, has become a crucial issue. The definitions of a “good wife” and a “good husband” are altering, and one result is that people’s personal relationships are under enormous pressure.

Family/household forms and structures are responding to these changes in a number of ways. The dependency ratio of adult income earners to children is a clear determinant of household security among low-income households, and consequently extended households made up of three generations or co-resident siblings are emerging. Increasing numbers of women are refusing to marry because marriage provides little security for them and their children, while adding to their vulnerability through the demands husbands can make on wives’ labour, time and income. More and more men are leaving the area and not returning because they cannot support their families. Young men are refusing to marry and/or to acknowledge paternity because they do not have the resources—and are not sure that they will ever have the resources—to enter into family commitments. As mentioned earlier, marriage in this kind of situation becomes a net

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<sup>9</sup> Niehaus 1994; Sharp 1994; Bank 1994.

drain on men's resources and this increases the numbers of absent fathers and unmarried teenage mothers.

Under conditions of extreme economic and social pressure, it becomes apparent that women's and men's interests do not converge but rather diverge. The needs, rights and obligations on which the conjugal contract depends can no longer be mutually constructed. This should not, however, be taken as straightforward evidence of the breakdown or dissolution of the family. Co-residence of adult, unmarried siblings was noted by Niehaus (1994), who reported sisters who went out to work and had their children looked after by their brothers. Family ties between generations were strong and a number of residential arrangements involving grandparents and grandchildren and multi-generational households were noted. Family ties of a broader kind were actually essential for establishing wider networks and residential arrangements that would allow households to secure access to income and to nurture the young. In the past, many analysts have failed to recognize this point because they have been implicitly comparing such family arrangements with the conjugal, nuclear family, and have thus found them wanting.

The question of crime, especially among young males, is clearly related to high levels of unemployment and to the impossibility of establishing adult status in a situation where they can neither marry nor work. The need for an income in order to be able to consume and survive is what draws some men into co-residence with their sisters and others into illegal methods of income generation. There are no incentives, and very few opportunities, for young men to build a positive sense of self. It is not so much because fathers are absent and have no authority, thus providing defective role models, but rather because the whole structure of masculine identity is in doubt. This may in turn provide further impetus for involvement in illegal activities that bring their own form of status, recognition and identity.

The problem of unsocialized youth is but one part of a larger problem about the care and nurturing of the young. Some critics have taken rising levels of youth crime, the number of children on the street and decreasing levels of educational attainment as evidence of the "crisis in the family". It seems obvious when we see children in difficulty to point to the family as the source of the problem, but how accurate is this perception? Is it really true that what we are seeing is the breakdown of family and social values? One way in which this issue can be addressed is to investigate what has been happening to children and to examine the determinants of their situation.

## **Children in the Labour Force and on the Street**

Anthropologists and historians have long pointed to the culturally and historically variable nature of childhood. The different conditions of children's lives generate different definitions of childhood, and individual children's subjective experiences of childhood will vary according to the specific understandings and ideals prevalent in any one context. The roles and tasks of children around the world differ, as do views about what it is reasonable to expect from a child. This becomes particularly apparent when we look at children in the labour force and the related problem of children on the street.

UNICEF estimates that around the world over 100 million children work—and this figure does not include farm and domestic workers. In low-income countries, 25 per cent of children between the ages of 6 and 11 are working and not in school, and, of those between the ages of 12 and 16, approximately 60 per cent are working. Over 100 million

school-aged children receive no education and over 100 million children live on the street. UNICEF (1990) reports that 150 million children in the world are malnourished.

The whole question of child labour depends both on the definition of “the child” and on the definition of “work”. In rural households in the developing world, children’s productive potential is important for household survival, and even if they are attending school regularly they will be working in the fields, herding and tending livestock, fetching water and fuel, and looking after younger children. Contributing to family labour in this way is rarely considered work. Childhood is not thought of as a period of time that exempts children from making their contribution to social and household needs and, while children between the ages of 5 and 15 are not considered full adults, they are seen as individuals with responsibilities and obligations. It has been estimated that 100 million rural children in India between those ages live in conditions that make their contribution to their family’s livelihood mandatory, but only 16 million are categorized by the government as “child labourers” (Nieuwenhuys 1994).

The underestimation of children’s contribution to family income and household survival is also a problem for children in urban contexts. Once again, children are not usually categorized as workers if they perform unpaid work related to their parents’ occupation (collecting rags or selling vegetables), if they work in household-based industries (carpet making, cigarette rolling, carpentry) or if they are involved in piece-work undertaken by the family (embroidery, flower decorations, lace-making).

Children work in both the formal and the informal sectors of the economy. Many children work in factories and on plantations. The conditions under which some of these children work are appalling, but child workers are favoured by employers because their labour is cheap. Children are often paid very little, and sometimes nothing at all, in spite of the fact that their reasons for working are due to the need for increased family income (Lawyers Committee for Human Rights 1991). In urban contexts, many working boys are self-employed as rag-collectors, newspaper sellers, shoe-shiners and parking boys. Some have given up on school, but others go to school for part of the day, while working in the early morning and late afternoon. Others work in small-scale industries doing piece-work, or as unpaid workers and apprentices in family workshops. In India, it has been estimated that 22 per cent of boys who work start full-time jobs at the age of 8 or younger, and another 25 per cent by the age of 10. Girls start their working lives earlier, either as maid servants in middle-class households or as housekeepers and caregivers to younger children in their own households. The latter category consists of surrogate mothers; it is not remunerated. Over 50 per cent of employed girls receive no cash payment for their work, while only 7 per cent of boys are unpaid. Where girls do receive payment, 96 per cent hand over their entire salary to the family, as compared to 52 per cent of working boys (Chatterjee Schlachter 1993).

Two things keep these children working: the economic requirements of parents and the economic advantage of employers. The two are connected. Low levels of wages in the formal and informal sectors of the economy for the urban poor, and especially for adult women, make child labour a necessity in order to bring in enough income to support the family. As the need for an educated workforce grows, children who have been pulled out of school to work—particularly girls who start at a very young age to substitute for their mothers—will be at a particular disadvantage in the labour market. Employers find child labour attractive because children are paid less than adults, they are easier to control and to lay off, and they are unable to insist on their rights.

The large number of working children in urban environments is related to the problem of children on the street. The available data show that children are on the street in increasing numbers, and it is often assumed that these children are without families and involved in crime and drugs. Recent work on children in urban environments has emphasized the importance of distinguishing between children who simply work on the streets and those who may be working on the streets, but are without families or homes. In India for example, as elsewhere, the rise in the number of street and working children is related to poverty and rapid urban growth, and in particular to the spread of slums and shantytowns. It has been estimated that the total slum population in the country in 1990 was between 45 million and 56 million people. Accurate numbers for street children and working children are hard to collect, but a national survey in 1983 calculated that there were 17 million working children (a figure considered too conservative). Working in an urban environment means being on the street, often for many hours each day. However, not all children working out on the street are homeless or without families. In Delhi, for example, 75 per cent of working children live with their families. These children go out to work on the streets during the day and return home at night to hand over most of their earnings. But, while the number of homeless children may be small as a proportion of the working child population, their numbers are still enormous (between 400,000 and 800,000 according to UNICEF).<sup>10</sup>

Among homeless working children, there are different degrees of connection to the family and of marginalization. Some visit their families frequently, preferring to live closer to their place of work with other children, while others do not have the money to travel home. There are also children who have run away from home or been abandoned. A recent five-country (Brazil, India, Italy, Kenya and the Philippines) study for UNICEF found that these children had often left home to avoid cruel treatment by a parent or step-parent or because the family had suffered a tragedy such as a parent's death (Szanton Blanc 1994). The heavy obligation of bringing in money, combined with strict parental control and beatings for the slightest misdemeanour, led many children to flee home. Sometimes such children were lured away from home by another child who could point out the advantages of being independent of parental interference and not having to work under impossible conditions to help support younger siblings. Children from female-headed households were not significantly more likely to be among the homeless, but dislike of step-parents who failed to provide support and affection in return for the child's contribution to home life was an important factor for many children. In the case of Brazil and Kenya, households that were notionally female-headed often had resident adult males in them compounding the difficulty of correlating female headship with child homelessness. What the study did find was that poverty was the major factor forcing children into work, often at as young as six years old, and that working and being very poor provided the context in which children were forced away from their families. Most of the homeless children interviewed—albeit in the rather different contexts provided by the five countries—expressed a great deal of sadness at having moved away from their families and retained a strong sense of the family as a potentially supportive and loving unit. Many of them had left home because of a lack of support and affection—not surprising in the context of poor families where both parents are working very long hours themselves for very little money.

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<sup>10</sup> Chatterjee Schlachter 1993; Black 1993; Szanton Blanc 1994.

Children on the streets are vulnerable to exploitation by adults and are easily drawn into prostitution; drug, alcohol and solvent abuse; gambling; and crime. They are exposed to rough handling and sometimes brutal treatment by security guards and the police. In Brazil, the killing of street children has been attributed to various so-called “justice committees” said to be made up of off-duty policemen and security guards (Swift 1993), and there have been reports from Colombia of shopkeepers and other civilians killing homeless children and child beggars (Buchanan 1994). Children often move around in gangs, which give some protection and offer a sense of belonging and commitment. A UNICEF report on Italy pointed out that children who cannot acquire prestige, recognition and a sense of self at home or in school are particularly vulnerable to the lure of petty crime, gambling, stealing handbags and motor scooters, and handling drugs. There is a strong sense of self at work in being able to manage the hostile urban environment and escape control and/or detection by adults and the authorities. The net result is that children often identify strongly with the violence they experience and subsequently engage in violence themselves (Lorenzo 1993).

Prostitution is a common way to make money for boys and girls. In Nairobi, where strong links between the street children have been observed, girls may be selling sexual services during the day and returning to their “community” at night. These alternative communities or families may involve pairing between girls and boys who consider themselves “husbands” and “wives”. Sexually transmitted diseases are a major health problem. A recent study in Brazil reported that street children engaged in sexual activity with peers and adults from inside and outside their circle. Sex was a means of acquiring money, food, clothes or shelter, but within the peer group it was used for entertainment, pleasure and comfort, as well as to exert power and establish dominance. Nearly half (42.9 per cent) of these children reported having sex under the influence of drugs or alcohol, 39.4 per cent had sexually transmitted diseases, 69 per cent of girls said their friends had been pregnant and 43.4 per cent that their friends had had abortions. Sexual initiation occurred at an early age: 10.8 years for boys and 12.4 years for girls. Well over half (60 per cent) of boys reported experience of anal intercourse. Many of the sexual encounters street youth described were exploitative or coercive, and girls were particularly vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation. The findings revealed that street youth were more vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS, than children living at home and that street girls were more likely to get pregnant and/or to have an abortion (Raffaelli et al. 1993).

Once children are on the street they are vulnerable in all sorts of ways, and this applies whether they are genuinely homeless or not—although those who are homeless are even more vulnerable. Children on the street are particularly susceptible to exploitation by adults. The inculcation of some into a “culture” of violence, petty crime and substance abuse reflects the harshness and brutality of their circumstances, as well as the necessity to make ends meet. These children suffer from emotional deprivation and from a reduction in their life chances, primarily because of their lack of education. However, there is very little direct evidence to suggest that the plight of these children is the result of incomplete or dysfunctional families. Poverty and low wage levels force families into a situation where they must substitute or augment adult labour with child labour, and once that process is established the route to a street existence becomes possible.

## Is There a Crisis in the Family?

It is not possible to use data like the material presented above on working and street children to answer the question of whether or not there is a crisis in the family. Family/household structures and strategies are very diverse worldwide and their response to processes of economic and political change is equally diverse. In other words, if there is a crisis in the family, it can only be a multiple set of crises in many different families.

However, it is evident that the general perception of crisis in the family is one that has very specific Euro-American origins. This does not mean that families in other parts of the globe are not experiencing marital dissolution, problems with caring for the elderly, poor intergenerational relations and economic difficulties. But in many countries there is no public discourse of family decline. Families are seen as the bedrock of all other social institutions and their social values are seen as intimately connected to economic success and national identity. The notion of crisis is nonetheless important because it has come onto the international agenda, as well as being evident on some national agendas, in a way that will have direct consequences for policy initiatives. The following are among the most important:

- Nation states in the developed world are finding the cost of welfare programmes hard to meet, and are alarmed by the speed and scale with which these costs are projected to rise. In this context, the debate about the family is one of the mechanisms through which states are seeking to redefine the relationship between the family, the market and the state. This process of redefinition is crucially dependent on portraying the family as an autonomous unit that is responsible for its own relations with the market. If a family fails to provide for its members then this failure is an individual one and may be attributed to a lack of effort or to the dysfunctional nature of the family unit.
- As a consequence of the redefinition of boundaries between families and the state, it is necessary to respond to the changes that have taken place in family/household structures. The rise in female-headed households is among the most important of these changes and these households have thus become a focus of policy debate. Research shows that women shoulder a disproportionate share of the costs of childcare and the reproduction of human capital, and the disadvantage of female-headed households provides graphic evidence of this fact. Women receive no compensation from either the market or the state for the burden they carry. The inability of female-headed households to manage in some contexts is not a result of the fact that they are dysfunctional families, but of the discrimination women suffer in the labour market and of the unequal distribution of labour and income within families. Public transfer programmes worldwide favour families with employed male breadwinners—effectively diverting resources away from families most in need.
- The supposed indicators of “family crisis”—marital conflict, youth crime, disadvantaged children and single mothers—are not simply the result of dysfunctional families, but must also be seen in the context of the strain placed on certain family relations and categories of individuals by poverty and extreme economic hardship. Lack of control over their lives forces many disadvantaged families into situations where personal relations break down under stress. Loss of self-esteem both for parents and children—combined with joblessness, unwanted pregnancies, substance abuse and despair—is made worse by the fact that poverty also dispossesses people of their political as well as their economic rights. Those who are not employed and who have little education are very unlikely to have much say in the conditions of their citizenship and/or in political processes in their countries.

The increasing tendency to blame families, and very often women within those families, for their inability to survive the structural changes wrought by increasing market integration and globalization is one way of avoiding an analysis of the causes and consequences of poverty and immiseration. The notion of a crisis in the family is to be resisted because of the way in which such a moral discourse prevents a proper analysis of



the situation many families face and justifies the denial of responsibility by the state and other institutions.

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## Chapter 2

# Gender Justice, Human Rights and Neoliberal Economic Policies<sup>1</sup>

*Diane Elson*<sup>2</sup>

(2002)

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There is widespread and deepening attention to the promotion of democracy and the fulfilment of human rights in ways that recognize the importance of gender justice. But there is also widespread and deepening concern that neoliberal economic policies are creating a disabling environment for women's enjoyment of human rights. This chapter explores the interconnections between neoliberal economic policies and women's substantive enjoyment of human rights, and develops some ideas on what a "rights-based approach to development" might mean for women. It looks at the intersections of two different discourses—that of human rights and that of economic efficiency—and examines the experience of women, especially poor women, in the era of neoliberal economic policies. It considers alternative approaches to economic policy that would provide a more enabling environment for social justice for poor women.

## Human Rights and Economic Resources

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights makes the moral claim that human rights belong equally to everyone by virtue of being human and sets out the content of these rights, as recognized by the members of the United Nations. Moreover, in Article 28, the Declaration states that: "Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized". In practical terms, human rights can be seen as claims to "a set of social arrangements—norms, institutions, laws, an enabling economic environment—that can best secure enjoyment of

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<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing, Diane Elson was Professor of Sociology at the University of Essex, United Kingdom. Previously, she worked for the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and for Manchester University where she was Chair in Development Studies.

these rights” (UNDP 2000:73). It is the obligation of everyone to contribute to such a set of arrangements. As Article 29 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights puts it, “Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible” (where “his” must of course be read to include “her”). Ratification of a human rights treaty stemming from the Declaration places a government under a specific obligation to protect, promote and fulfil the rights specified in that treaty.

All human rights require resources for their fulfilment. This is just as true of the rights specified in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (such as the right not to be held in slavery, subject to torture, subjected to arbitrary arrest or arbitrary interference), as of those specified in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (such as the right to social security and an adequate standard of living). Enjoyment of so-called negative freedoms depends on well-resourced systems of law and order, financed by taxation, just as much as enjoyment of so-called positive freedoms, such as the right to education, depends on well-resourced educational systems, financed by taxation. Resources, however, are not unlimited. Moreover, they can be used in a variety of alternative ways. So any human society has to have ways of setting priorities for resource use and of judging the desirability of alternative ways of using resources, recognizing that in many circumstances there are trade-offs between achievements of different goals within a limited period of time. Economists of all persuasions have emphasized this and have stressed that attention has to be paid to the effectiveness of different ways of using resources to attain human goals, including the realization of human rights.

Human rights discourse does not focus on issues of priorities and trade-offs. Instead it emphasizes the indivisibility of human rights (see, for instance, the statement by Mary Robinson, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights—UNDP 2000:113). So there is often a gap in communication. However, the *Human Development Report 2000* on human rights and human development (UNDP 2000) suggests it is possible to bridge that gap if we can agree that the idea of the indivisibility of human rights should not be seen as a claim that setting priorities and recognizing trade-offs do not apply to the realization of human rights. Rather, it should be seen as a claim that there is no hierarchy of human rights as ultimate goals: they are all equally valuable and mutually reinforcing. The idea of indivisibility is also an assertion that the procedures for setting priorities for resource use and for judging the effectiveness of resource use must incorporate principles of respect for all human rights. They should be procedures that take as their starting point Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act toward one another in a spirit of brotherhood” (understanding “brotherhood” to mean “human solidarity”). The indivisibility of human rights means that measures to protect, promote and fulfil any particular right should not create obstacles to the protection, promotion and fulfilment of any other human right.

It is easier to bridge the gap between discourses of human rights and resource allocation if we bear in mind that the fulfilment of human rights is a complex process unfolding over time, not a single legislative act at a moment in time. The Preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes this in its references to “progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance”. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights further elaborates the idea of realization over time, using the phrase “with a view to achieving progressively”. It is sometimes thought that “progressive realization” only

applies to economic, social and cultural rights, but I would suggest that the fulfilment of civil and political rights can also be seen as a process of progressive realization—even though this wording is not found in the Covenant. For instance, periodic elections with universal suffrage and secret ballots are a prerequisite for the realization of the right to take part in the government of your country, directly or through freely chosen representatives. But they do not ensure that every citizen's concerns are equally included. Achieving a situation in which “the will of the people shall be the basis for the authority of government”—rather than, say, the will of powerful transnational corporations—is much more complex. Human rights treaties place governments under an obligation to end violations of human rights immediately as far as possible; and to set in motion arrangements that will lead to clear reductions in violations and a deepening of the enjoyment of human rights over time. This applies as much to arrangements that govern the allocation of resources as to those that ensure equality before the law. The Declaration of Human Rights and the treaties stemming from it make it clear that governments and all other organizations and individuals have a duty to contribute to the creation of an enabling economic environment for the enjoyment of human rights.

### **The Neoliberal Economic Environment**

The neoliberal agenda, which began in the 1970s, and came to dominance from the early 1980s, presumes that the best way to give substance to human rights is to reduce the role of the state, liberate entrepreneurial energy, achieve economic efficiency and promote faster economic growth. Some governments, notably the US government led by Ronald Reagan and the UK government led by Margaret Thatcher, embraced this agenda of their own volition; but many governments in the South had it thrust upon them as the condition for more loans from the IMF and World Bank in the context of the debt crisis of the early 1980s. The neoliberal economic agenda centres on strengthening private property and profit-driven markets and retrenching the state. Almost everywhere in the world, the rising trend in the ratio of public expenditure to national income has come to an end since the mid-1980s (World Bank 1997). It has marginally increased in countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and sub-Saharan Africa, fallen in the Middle East and Latin America and stayed more or less the same in East Asia. In Africa and Latin America, shares of expenditures on health and education in national budgets fell in the 1980s. Moreover, in those regions, public expenditure levels in the 1980s also fell significantly in real terms and, in countries with rapid population growth, there was a decline in real expenditure per person. Such cutbacks led to deterioration in social programmes in many countries (United Nations 1999:52). The emphasis on fiscal and monetary policy was “sound” finance, irrespective of social costs. Public assets were transferred to private ownership (although they were often run by the same social elite, now operating as business people rather than as officials). Throughout the world, the regulation of markets was changed to permit businesses to move goods, services and finance around the world much more easily and speedily. At the same time permanent labour migration declined, in large part because of increased restriction by developed countries against labour mobility from developing countries. New forms of impermanent migration, offering reduced rights, developed, and there was an increase in undocumented migration (United Nations 1999:31).

The neoliberal policy regime is described by its proponents as an agenda of liberalization and stabilization—persuasive words, for it is hard to get a hearing for economic agendas that say they will promote authoritarianism and instability. But critics charge that the underlying effect has been to assert new disciplines on those who do not own capital (see Gill 2001). Very high rates of inflation are indeed an important problem for poor people, but so are very low rates of inflation, which generally denote stagnant employment opportunities. Moreover, inflation can be brought under control in a number of ways—with a varying balance between cutting expenditure on public services important to poor people and raising taxation on the incomes of rich people.<sup>3</sup>

It is important to distinguish between two kinds of advocates of neoliberalism: fundamentalists and pragmatists. Fundamentalists, such as Hayek, believe that the state is inevitably the key threat to liberty; that free enterprise is good in itself, not only for the growth it will bring; that markets are realms of freedom; and that promotion of entrepreneurship and innovation is not only key to efficiency and growth, but is also good in itself. Taxation is a kind of expropriation and must be minimized (along with public expenditure). Government budgets should be balanced. There should be no discretion in fiscal and monetary policy. Rather, such policies should be governed by rules built into the constitution, such as the requirement to ensure that the government budget is always in balance and that the money supply does not expand faster than a stipulated rate (see Gill 2001). For fundamentalists, empirical evidence on outcomes is less relevant because neoliberal policies are good in themselves. Neoliberalism widens opportunities. Everyone can be an entrepreneur if they so choose.

Pragmatists emphasize “optimality” rather than entrepreneurship. “Optimality” consists of getting maximum output from a set of inputs, with the composition of output determined by the preferences of those who will consume the output (“consumer sovereignty”). Human labour is treated as an input, on the same footing as machinery, raw materials and land. The operational criterion of success is the rate of growth of output. Private enterprise and market relations are judged to be better, on the whole, at promoting this kind of efficiency. The majority of mainstream economists are pragmatists.

In principle, pragmatists recognize that both states and markets can fail to achieve economic efficiency, but during the 1980s and early 1990s, state failure was identified by many mainstream economists as the more serious problem.<sup>4</sup> Pragmatists tend to believe that the macroeconomic policy framework should be determined by well-trained technocrats. They are responsive to evidence that policies are not producing growth, that financial crises are occurring, and that poverty is deepening, but dispute about whether this is really the result of the policies or of failure to implement them properly or of external events like bad weather. Pragmatists are willing to allow the importance of public goods and a bigger role for the state.

Evidence of the shift to pragmatism at the World Bank can be seen in the changing stance on fees for public education. In the mid-1980s, World Bank economists developed an economic model showing that, where there is excess demand for education, charging fees at all levels of education would be good from both an equity and efficiency perspective (Psacharopoulos et al. 1986). Introduction of such charges for primary education was made a condition of loans to several countries. Subsequently, the Bank

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<sup>3</sup> For further discussion, see Taylor (1991).

<sup>4</sup> For more guidance to the relevant literature, see Toye (1987).

distanced itself from such charges and the emphasis has switched to community participation in the provision of education (Fine and Rose 2001:167). Community participation also comes at a price: in many poor countries, it means spending time to construct school facilities or growing crops to finance the teachers' salaries.

The World Bank has so far been more pragmatic than the International Monetary Fund (Elson and Cağatay 2000), but both strongly support "free enterprise" globalization and a policy of "grow first, redistribute after". Both organizations talked in the late 1990s about the importance of citizen participation in decision making, about local-level allocation of public expenditure (here citizens are allowed to discipline officials and politicians), but not in the determination of the parameters of macroeconomic policy (for example, how much public expenditure there should be in total). At this level, citizens, officials and politicians must all be disciplined by market forces and bow to the technocratic economic consensus about what will promote growth of GDP and economic efficiency (Bakker 2001; Elson and Cağatay 2000).

The main intersection between neoliberal economic discourse and that of human rights is in terms of Article 17 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property". The right to own property is construed in neoliberal thinking as entailing the right to sell your property; and the right to use it to make a profit by employing other people. In some strands of neoliberal thinking, taxation and government regulations that reduce profits are interpreted as arbitrary deprivations of property. Concerns about poverty and inequality can be dealt with, neoliberals assume, by encouraging better-off people to give to the poor and by encouraging governments to introduce measures to redistribute some output, being careful to ensure that they do not jeopardize incentives for economic growth. Thus there is no direct link between most of the rights specified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the neoliberal criteria for judging resource allocation arrangements. The best resource allocation arrangements from a neoliberal viewpoint are those that maximize economic growth and encourage private enterprise. This will, it is supposed, indirectly support the right to an adequate standard of living (Article 25) by increasing the availability of resources. It is proposed by pragmatic neoliberals that links can be created between greater availability of resources and the enjoyment of human rights by setting targets for poverty reduction and for enjoyment of health and education and by drawing up plans to achieve these targets with the participation of poor people. However, the post-Washington consensus emphasis on participation in public expenditure planning has been argued to be shallow and superficial, focusing only on consultation about how to allocate additional funds between different services, and not on consultation about the overall macroeconomic strategy (Cheru 2001; Elson and Cağatay 2000).

The neoliberal objective has been to reduce poverty through participation in markets wherever possible; and to provide social safety nets for those who fall out of market-based prosperity (a common thread in World Bank 1990, 2000). Access is privatized in the sense that the main way in which people are expected to obtain the resources required to support human life is via private production for sale and the purchase of the goods and services they need. Access to a livelihood is privatized in several ways—privatization of public enterprises, contracting out of public services, reduction in the social rights of employees in the name of flexibility and efficiency, dissolution of social arrangements for sharing agricultural work under the pressure of commercialization, privatization of land. Access to publicly provided services such as

health, education and water is made dependent on ability to pay through the introduction of fees for use. Provision for old age and ill health is privatized through privatization of insurance—a privatization of risk. Credit is privatized through financial “liberalization” both nationally and internationally. There is a less visible privatization that comes from transferring costs of providing care from the public sector to households and communities. Neoliberal policies find it hard to take account of non-monetary costs and benefits of any policy change. Fiscal and monetary policy (which is a key determinant of the incomes generated by market exchange) is privatized, in the sense that the arbiters of policy are private financial institutions buying and selling government bonds, rather than elected representatives and social partners (such as trade unions, farmers associations and community organizations). All of this relies on the unspoken and invisible ultimate safety net of women’s unpaid work.<sup>5</sup>

### **Alternatives to the Neoliberal Agenda**

The optimism about the neoliberal agenda has been challenged by many researchers and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) was at the forefront in sponsoring studies that investigated the social impact of this agenda, with a particular focus on the well-being of poor children. Widespread evidence was found of deterioration of the nutritional status of children in poor countries (Cornia et al. 1987). Moreover, neoliberal economic policies have not delivered improved economic growth in many cases. Economic growth in the 1980s and 1990s has been much lower in most regions than that achieved in the 1950s and 1960s in the era of regulated markets and Keynesian macroeconomics (Singh and Zammit 2000). In the poorest countries per capita GDP has actually declined. A recent study comparing the annual average growth rate in the period 1980–2000 with that in the period 1960–1980, for the countries that were poorest at the beginning of the two periods, reveals a change to a decline of 0.5 per cent a year in the later period, compared to an increase of 1.9 per cent in the earlier period (Weisbrot et al. 2001). The same study found that progress in increasing life expectancy, reducing infant mortality and enrolling children in school all slowed down, comparing the later period with the earlier period.

One response to such evidence is to argue that, despite the negative impacts of the neoliberal agenda, there was no alternative set of policies that was economically sustainable. If countries had massive debts that they were unable to service, and were on the verge of bankruptcy, then they had to cut government expenditure, goes the argument. Raising taxes, it is suggested, would have discouraged the foreign investment they needed. Neoliberal policies were a necessary response to the unsustainable policies of the 1970s, which had resulted in widespread economic crisis.

An alternative reading, on which this chapter is premised, is that the debt crisis itself was a result of the neoliberal agenda rather than a response to it. The roots of the debt crisis lie in the decisions taken in the 1970s about how to adjust to the huge OPEC-inspired rises in the price of oil in 1973 and 1979. One possibility was to recycle the massive additional dollar earnings of oil-exporting countries to oil-importing countries via a low-conditionality facility at the IMF. Such a facility did operate in 1974 and 1975,

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<sup>5</sup> See Bakker 2001; Elson 2001; Elsevier 2000.



enabling countries with oil-related balance of payments difficulties to borrow from the IMF at below-market rates of interest, with few strings attached (Killick 1984:135). Indeed, in the years 1973–1974, almost two-thirds of the resources provided by the IMF involved only low conditionality (Killick 1984:160). However, under pressure from the United States, the main emphasis was placed on recycling via the emerging private international financial market, to the enormous benefit of US, European and Japanese banks.

This international market turned out to be very different from the competitive market depicted in neoclassical economics textbooks and the overselling of loans by private banks was a major factor in the evolution of the debt crisis (Loxley 1997). A further factor was the monetary policies of the Reagan and Thatcher governments, which deepened the recession of the early 1980s, depriving indebted countries of markets for their exports. Moreover, when the debt crisis broke in the early 1980s, the strategy for managing it, heavily influenced by the US Treasury, was designed primarily to meet the needs of private creditors: “a lender-of-last-resort function designed to keep the Northern banking system stable” (Devlin 1989). In addition, the strings attached to IMF loans were tightened and by 1980 more than three-quarters of IMF lending was high-conditionality lending (Killick 1984:160). There were always critics pointing out that the oil price rises and the debt crisis were collective problems and needed internationally equitable solutions. One of the most prominent, the Canadian economist Gerry Helleiner, raised the issue of the risks involved in recycling petrodollars through the private market as early as 1977; and urged that contingency plans against a recession be prepared (Loxley 1997:140). His warnings went unheeded.

Helleiner, and other heterodox economists, repeatedly proposed alternative ways of dealing with the debt crisis, including alternative ways of restructuring economies of debtor countries.<sup>6</sup> But instead of a reduction in the exposure of indebted countries to private international financial markets, this exposure was increased. Opening up the domestic capital market to foreign lenders (capital account liberalization) became a standard condition of IMF lending, in the mistaken belief that this would promote efficient resource allocation. Moreover governments of indebted countries were encouraged to take responsibility not only for public external debt but also for the external debt of the country’s private firms. Take the case of Chile, analysed by Meller (1991), where almost two-thirds of the Chilean external debt in the early 1980s belonged to the private sector, especially to Chilean banks. When the debt crisis hit Chile in 1983, foreign banks pressured the government into providing a government guarantee for the debts of Chilean banks, bailing out both the foreign creditors and high-income Chilean bank shareholders, at an annual cost of about 4 per cent of GDP in 1982–1985. At the same time there were sharp cuts in public expenditures that benefited poorer groups, with expenditure on health, housing and education reduced by 20 per cent per capita.

The Chilean case also illustrates another key feature of the implementation of the neoliberal agenda in the years since the debt crisis: a propensity to preserve the position of the rich at the expense of that of lower income groups. Research by the United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER) has shown a widespread pattern of widening inequality in household incomes in many countries in the 1980s and 1990s (WIDER 1999). Alternative responses to the debt crisis have repeatedly been suggested by heterodox economists since the early 1980s.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> For further discussion, see Cornia et al. 1987; Culpeper et al. 1997.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Killick 1984; Helleiner 1985; Cornia et al. 1987.

They typically call for less deflationary macroeconomic policies, with more external financing and a longer period for adjustment; and a broad redirection of a country's resources to support the production and consumption of poorer social groups. Such alternatives require changes at both national and international levels. They are economically feasible. The problem has been building political support for them in a climate dominated by the neoliberal agenda and the interests of private financial institutions. They have typically been framed in terms of equity rather than in terms of human rights. The analysis that follows here is predicated upon some such alternative, but is framed to make a stronger connection to human rights. Equity objectives may be treated as optional, but respect for human rights is obligatory. A human rights framework may thus offer new opportunities for changing the agenda. In a widely cited article on economic and social rights, Beetham (1995) has suggested that the enjoyment of economic and social rights has indeed been made more precarious from the early 1980s onward by the displacement of collective choice by market forces, and the growing influence of sentiment in financial markets. He also points to the fact that human rights language provides a more authoritative and urgent discourse than "welfare" discourses and "identifies the deprived themselves as potential agents of social change, as active claimants of rights" (1995:60). It is in the hope that a human rights focus may make a difference that the analysis here is presented.

### **Women's Enjoyment of Human Rights in the Neoliberal Era**

There has long been criticism of the implications of neoliberal economic policies for poor women in poor countries, much of it with an emphasis on World Bank and International Monetary Fund stabilization and structural adjustment programmes.<sup>8</sup>

There are many problems in assessing the impact of particular policy programmes on women as compared to men. There is still a lack of timely, reliable, sex-disaggregated statistics for many parts of the world. Moreover, it is intrinsically difficult to examine causal links between policies and events that follow their introduction. The policy may not have been fully implemented. Generally, there are also other significant events taking place at the same time—such as changes in social and political forces and changes in the weather. It is hard to allow for the effects of these. Economists often try to construct a "counterfactual" as a benchmark; this is a "best guess" about what would have happened if the policy had not been introduced. But this is a matter of judgement, not an exact science. Should the counterfactual be the continuation of the debt crisis that often precipitated the introduction of neoliberal economic policies in countries in the South, or should it be the improvements that could have been introduced by an alternative set of economic policies that hypothetically could have created a more enabling environment? Not surprisingly, neoliberal economists tend to choose the former, and those who are critical of neoliberal policies, the latter. There is also disagreement about what should be regarded as parameters and what should be regarded as variables. An individual country may have to take debt repayment as an inescapable obligation but the creditors have more scope for choice about whether to exact repayments. Interpretations of the results of empirical studies are also

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<sup>8</sup> See reviews of the empirical literature by Benería 1995; Summerfield and Aslanbeigui 1998; Elson 1995b; for important case studies, see Moser 1992; Brown and Kerr 1997; for critiques of the underlying economic theory, see Elson 1991, 1995a.

influenced by the theoretical framework used. Neoliberal economists who use an economic theory that does not take into account gender differences within households, or the role of unpaid care work in creating and sustaining the labour force, or the cultural persistence of gender divisions of labour, tend not to see any reason why neoliberal policies should have an adverse impact on women (Elson 1991, 1995a).

Pragmatic neoliberal economists are becoming more aware of the importance of gender in economics, as demonstrated in the World Bank report, *Engendering Development* (World Bank 2001). This report focuses mainly on charting the relationship between gender inequality and economic development, arguing that reducing gender inequality promotes economic development and promoting economic development promotes gender equality. It devotes only a few pages to considering the implications of neoliberal policies for women, focusing on the impact of structural adjustment policies in sub-Saharan Africa and in Latin America and the Caribbean. It reviews some arguments and evidence on how these policies harm gender equality and also some arguments and evidence on how adjustment promotes gender equality. It concludes: "While there is evidence to support both sides of the debate about the impact of structural adjustment, on balance the evidence suggests that females' absolute status and gender equality improved, not deteriorated over the adjustment period" (World Bank 2001:215).

This conclusion is based on the argument that over the adjusting period girls' schooling generally rose relative to boys; that female life expectancy continued to rise, with the exception of sub-Saharan Africa; and that the gender gap in wages has decreased in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa over the adjustment period. It also claims that in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean gender equality of rights either stayed the same or improved between 1985 and 1990.

It is to the credit of the report that it does raise the issue of links between economic policies and women's rights, but it does so in a very cursory way. The report discusses gender equality in rights in its first chapter, comparing gender equality in rights in 1985 and 1990, using data from Charles Humana's *World Human Rights Guide* (Humana 1986, 1992), which presents evaluations of the enjoyment of 40 dimensions of human rights—including political and legal equality for women; social and economic equality for women; and equality of men and women in marriage and divorce proceedings. He does this by collecting human rights information from the United Nations and other international institutions, governments, NGOs, research institutions and the media for as many countries as possible. On the basis of this, he makes a judgement about the extent to which the right in question is violated in that country. This judgement is then represented as a grade on a 0–3 scale. A "0" represents a constant pattern of violation of human rights; while a "3" represents unqualified respect for human rights. The grades were not available for any other years at the time of the World Bank research. The World Bank report uses these grades to look at gender equality in rights on a regional basis, weighting the grade for each country by its population (World Bank 2001:4, 38–41). No region enjoys the highest grade for any of the three gender-sensitive dimensions of human rights under consideration.

With respect to gender equality in political and legal rights, the report finds that gender equality is highest in the OECD countries and has not changed in the period 1985–1990. Next highest is Europe and Central Asia (formerly centrally planned economies), but in this region there was a deterioration over the period to levels comparable with South Asia. Latin America and the Caribbean, in contrast, have enjoyed an increase over the period to almost the same level as the OECD countries. South Asia has seen virtually no

change. After South Asia in terms of levels of rights, as judged by Humana, comes sub-Saharan Africa, where there has been an increase in gender equality. The Middle East and North Africa come next, and are judged to have experienced a deterioration. Last in the ranking is East Asia and the Pacific, where gender equality is judged to have improved somewhat over the period. So the picture is mixed, with two regions apparently staying the same, three regions improving, and two regions deteriorating.

Turning to gender equality in social and economic rights, Humana's grading shows a different pattern, both in terms of rankings and changes over time. The OECD countries again rank highest with no change; next comes East Asia and the Pacific, which has shown a small increase; the formerly centrally planned economies of Eastern Europe and Central Asia have fallen from second place to more or less the same level as Latin America and the Caribbean, where there has been only a slight increase; the Middle East and North Africa come next and have experienced a deterioration, followed by sub-Saharan Africa, with no change, and finally South Asia, with a small increase. The World Bank report sums this up by saying "there was little, if any, improvement in gender equality in these rights between 1985 and 1990" (World Bank 2001:38). Since these are the rights most directly linked with neoliberal economic policies, one might have expected more attention to be paid to the deterioration of these rights in two regions that have introduced neoliberal policies—Eastern Europe and Central Asia and the Middle East and North Africa. But since the World Bank (2001:ch.5) assessment is limited to structural adjustment policies in Latin America and the Caribbean and sub-Saharan Africa, the regions of deterioration are ignored. There are in any case a number of problems with Humana's system of evaluating women's human rights that are discussed below.

Equality in marriage and divorce rights appears to vary across the regions more than gender equality in the other two categories of rights. There are judged to have been improvements in the OECD countries (which have the highest ranking); a deterioration in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, which nevertheless still rank second; a big increase in Latin America and the Caribbean, which ranks third; no change in East Asia and the Pacific, which ranks fourth. There have apparently been improvements in the other regions, which now rank as follows: fifth, sub-Saharan Africa; sixth, Middle East and North Africa and, seventh, South Asia. So, in relation to marriage and divorce rights, most regions have apparently seen an improvement.

Overall, the most striking change in the second half of the 1980s is judged to have been in the former centrally planned economies, where gender equality is judged to have fallen from its previously high level on all the three indicators. The second important pattern shown by the indicators is that gender equality in economic and social rights is apparently lower than for the other two types of rights and has shown only slight improvements in only two regions.

There are, however, many problems in using Humana's grades in this way. Humana's grading system is inherently problematic because it reduces complex and multidimensional social practices to a single scale, on the basis of subjective judgements using information that is not revealed. Humana does not discuss exactly what statistics and other evidence he uses or how he weights different aspects of the rights he considers. For instance, in his comments on the grades assigned for equality in economic and social rights, he sporadically mentions education, employment and earnings, and female circumcision. However, there is no indication of how he weights these components or how reliable the evidence is about them or what thresholds he uses. Nor is there any discussion of why female circumcision is singled out for attention when other forms of

gender-based violence are not mentioned. In addition, it is not clear how he treats the issue of how far a formal legal right is actually enjoyed in practice by the majority of women in a country. The inherent problems of Humana's grading system are compounded by the World Bank in using them to construct population-weighted regional averages. Such averages are dominated by the grades assigned to the biggest countries and obscure government responsibility for ensuring there is no discrimination against women.

In any case, indicators of gender equality in rights do not reveal whether an improvement in gender equality has been achieved as a result of equalizing up, so that women's position comes closer to that of men, or equalizing down, so that men's position comes closer to that of women. There have been concerns expressed that neoliberal economic policies lead to harmonizing down, especially in the labour market. We need information not only about the gap between men and women in their enjoyment of rights but also the level of rights they enjoy.

It is clear that changes in the enjoyment of specific human rights need to be investigated using empirical research for specific countries and, if possible, for specific groups of men and women. There is reason to be concerned that it is poor women who are particularly adversely affected by neoliberal policies—either directly in the present or in terms of adversely affecting the prospects for the progressive realization of their economic and social rights. Unfortunately, available empirical evidence of changes over time is rarely systematically disaggregated by gender and class. Here we look at women's enjoyment of the economic and social rights specified in Articles 23–26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in the 1980s and 1990s—the neoliberal years. We make considerable use of two recent publications: a report on progress toward the realization of women's rights issued by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM 2000) and a report called *Social Watch*, prepared for an international network of NGOs and edited by Roberto Bissio of the Instituto del Tercer Mundo, Uruguay (Bissio 1999). Where possible we investigate whether trends indicate sustained progress toward a full enjoyment of these rights. This rests on the judgement, explained earlier, that there was nothing inevitable about the emergence of the economic crisis of the early 1980s; and, in particular, nothing inevitable about the measures taken to deal with the debt burden of countries in the South. What happened was in large measure due to decisions of key players on how to govern the international economy, and alternative ways of governing the international economy were always available.<sup>9</sup>

Article 23 of the Declaration of Human Rights deals with employment rights. It begins by stating that “Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment” (reflecting the prevailing gender relations of the mid-twentieth century, it does not recognize unpaid care work as work). It is clear that women's participation in the labour force has increased in most parts of the world in the 1980s and 1990s (United Nations 1999:8). Of course, this was happening in many countries in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s before the major turn to neoliberal policies. However, there is evidence that the trend was strengthened in countries that introduced structural adjustment programmes (Cağatay and Özler 1995). In particular, there have been dramatic increases in countries that have reoriented their manufacturing industries to the world market and the service sector has continued to absorb large numbers of women. In a very wide range of countries, women's

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<sup>9</sup> For more discussion of this see, for instance, Culpeter et al. (1997).

share of paid employment in industry and services increased in the period 1985–1997 (UNIFEM 2000: 73–75). The exception is Eastern Europe, where the transition from central planning to market-based allocation of resources has been accompanied in many countries by falls in female participation rates—though this may partly reflect an “informalization” of women’s work and reduced visibility in labour force statistics (UNIFEM 2000:73).

Women’s increased participation in the labour force does not necessarily mean that women enjoy various rights specified in Article 23, such as “just and favourable conditions of work”, “protection against unemployment”, “the right to equal pay for equal work”, “the right to just and favourable remuneration...supplemented...by...social protection”, and the “right to form and to join trade unions”. The lack of all of these rights in many export-oriented factories has been well-documented (United Nations 1999).

In industry and services, women typically only earned about 78 per cent of what men earned in the late 1990s (UNIFEM 2000:92). There is some evidence that the gap has narrowed in a number of countries during the 1980s and 1990s. Data from the International Labour Organization (ILO) suggest the gap has fallen in 22 out of the 29 countries for which the ILO has data (UNIFEM 2000:94). Of these, none are in Africa and 11 are in Latin America. Studies listed in the report on *Engendering Development* (World Bank 2001:app.3) suggest a fall in two countries in Africa and eight countries in Latin America. As is clear from this, these two publications do not always agree on the countries in which this has happened. The UNIFEM report has the gender gap widening in Chile and Venezuela, while the World Bank report indicates that it has narrowed. The UNIFEM report cautions that data on the gender wage gap in developing countries are likely to reflect mainly the earnings of those in full-time “formal” employment, as much informal employment is not captured by statistical surveys in many countries. It reports that studies by the international network, Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), suggest that the gender wage gap is likely to be higher in informal employment. The evidence does not seem sufficiently robust for the weight placed on it by the World Bank (2001) report, as an important piece of evidence that structural adjustment has not had an adverse effect on gender equality in Africa and Latin America. In so far as the gap has been narrowing, it is more likely to reflect mainly the experience of better educated and better off women than that of poor women. Rapid economic growth is not necessarily associated with a lower gender wage gap. In East and South-East Asia, the countries with the fastest growth have had the biggest gender wage gaps (Seguino 2000).

Many women in all parts of the world have lost employment, through displacement by cheaper imports (as a result of trade liberalization) or recession or financial crisis,<sup>10</sup> and governments have typically given priority to the problems of unemployed men. Many jobs have been reorganized to make them more “flexible”, but “flexibility” has turned out to mean a weakening of labour standards rather than a better balance between work and life (Standing 1999). There has been “feminization” of employment not only in terms of increases in women’s overall share of paid employment but also in the sense that the labour market conditions of men have deteriorated and become more like the precarious labour market conditions that have typically characterized many “women’s jobs”. There

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<sup>10</sup> United Nations 1999; Lim 2000; Kucera and Milberg 2000.

has been a decline in the proportion of jobs that have security of employment, rights against unfair dismissal, pension rights, health insurance rights, maternity rights. There has been rapid growth in “informal employment”, which lacks social protection. It is estimated that well over half of the urban jobs in Africa and Asia are informal, and a quarter in Latin America and the Caribbean. The share is higher for new jobs, with as many as 83 per cent of new jobs in Latin America and 93 per cent in Africa being informal (Charmes 1998). Women’s share of informal employment is typically higher than their share of formal employment.

Women’s increased participation in the labour market does mean that barriers that formerly excluded women from paid employment are crumbling and that women’s right to paid work is increasingly being recognized, but one must be cautious in interpreting this as evidence that women have “free choice of employment”. The choices that poor women make are constrained by the pressures of poverty. Case studies document the way that neoliberal policies have forced poor women in poor countries to accept whatever paid work they could get, despite deteriorating pay and conditions, in order to feed and clothe their families in the context of rising prices and falling male employment (González de la Rocha 2000; Moser 1996).

Article 24 of the Declaration states that “Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay”. The impact of neoliberal policies on women’s enjoyment of free time has been a major area of concern. Very long hours of work and enforced overtime have been documented in many export-oriented factories in developing countries. Moreover, there is reason to expect that the time that has to be spent in poor families on unpaid work caring for family members will have to be increased to compensate for cutbacks in expenditure on public services. This will be intensified by strategies to reduce expenditure as prices of food and other basic goods rise as a result of cutbacks in subsidies and devaluation of the currency. Shopping around and buying unprocessed food (which is cheaper but takes more time to prepare) both take up more time. Unless men and boys increase their participation in unpaid care work in poor families, the time that poor women and girls have for rest and leisure is likely to fall. This is hard to document since the collection of time use data is in its early stages in most developing countries. Case studies in a range of countries have documented the time pressures that poor women in poor countries face and the way in which neoliberal policies intensify those pressures.<sup>11</sup> The squeeze on the time of adult women may mean that demands on daughters’ time intensifies—with adverse implications for their schooling.<sup>12</sup> There is no sign, however, of these pressures leading to men playing a substantially greater role in unpaid care work in households.

The right to an adequate standard of living is addressed by Article 25, which makes specific reference to health, food, clothing, housing, medical care and social services. It also specifies that everyone has a right to social security in the event of “unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood”; and states that “motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance”. One important dimension of an adequate standard of living is money income. The World Bank produces statistics on the number of people living on less than one US dollar a day. In 1987 there were 1,227 million people in this position; by 1993 the number had increased to 1,314

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<sup>11</sup> Floro 1995; Moser 1992; Elson 1995b; Zohir 1998.

<sup>12</sup> See Moser 1992; Senapaty 1997.

million (Bissio 1999:43). Of course, population as a whole has been growing at the same time. Overall, the proportion of people living in extreme poverty fell only slightly over this period, from 30.1 per cent to 29.4 per cent. In three regions the proportion rose: in Latin America and the Caribbean from 22.0 to 23.5 per cent; in sub-Saharan Africa, from 38.5 per cent to 39.1 per cent; in Europe and Central Asia from 0.6 per cent to 3.5 per cent (Bissio 1999:43). During this period the proportion living in extreme poverty in Asia declined somewhat, but this changed in the late 1990s, as financial crisis hit living standards: “progress slowed temporarily in some Asian countries in the late 1990s, and ground to a halt or reversed in others” (IMF et al. 2000:6). There are no comprehensive statistics on what proportion of these poor people are women and girls—making it hard to come to conclusions on the degree to which there has been a feminization of income poverty. There has been a growth in the proportion of households that are female-headed, but the evidence is mixed on whether these households are disproportionately poor. There are ways of measuring the degree to which women and girls are overrepresented among poor people, using data from household surveys, but neither the World Bank nor national statistical offices have attached any priority to producing such measures.<sup>13</sup>

Access to social services is another important dimension of the right to an adequate standard of living. There is widespread agreement that health workers with midwifery skills are key to reducing maternal mortality. Data by region on the proportion of births attended by skilled health personnel in 1988 and 1998 show little progress in Latin America and the Caribbean (from 70 to 77 per cent) and in Asia, excluding China and India (from 29 to 32 per cent). In the Middle East and North Africa, progress was more substantial (from 48 to 61 per cent) but in sub-Saharan Africa, the proportion fell (from 50 to 46 per cent) (IMF et al. 2000:14). Country-level data covering all regions suggest that, in just over one-third of 132 countries in the world, there was a reduction in the proportion of births attended by skilled health personnel from around 1990 to around 1996 (calculated from Bissio 1999:31–32). There has also been a fall in access to health care in general in the same period in a wide range of countries. In 20 developing countries out of 43 for which data are available, the proportion of the population with access to health services fell (calculated from Bissio 1999:29). Such a fall is likely to imply more burdens for poor women, as they have the main responsibility for maintaining the health of other family members. Problems in maintaining family health are compounded when safe drinking water is unavailable. In 15 out of 62 developing countries for which data are available, the proportion of the population with access to safe drinking water fell in the period from around 1990 to 1995 (calculated from Bissio 1999:38). Poor nutrition compounds health problems. Data from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) suggest that national-level food availability fell in 67 of 159 countries in the same period (calculated from Bissio 1999:26–27). Child malnutrition has also increased in a third of 60 developing countries for which data are available for the period 1990–1996 (calculated from Bissio 1999:28). When the price of food or health care rises, girls may be more at risk than boys of having their needs unmet. A review of quantitative studies for Ghana, India, Malaysia, Pakistan, Peru and the Philippines concludes that “the demand for investment in women and girls tends to be more sensitive to changes in prices (or costs) than demand for investment in men and boys” (World Bank 2001:165).

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<sup>13</sup> For further discussion, see UNIFEM 2000:95–96.



Many people have suffered loss of livelihood in circumstances beyond their control and have not enjoyed any social security, in contravention of Articles 22 and 25 of the Declaration. In many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, women farmers have been particularly hard hit by privatization of land, as Western-style private property regimes have been introduced at the expense of non-market systems of land tenure. “By conferring formal ownership on land and water, privatization has in general strengthened the control of already powerful groups over these resources to the detriment of small-scale farmers, particularly women’s rights and access to resources” (United Nations 1999:40). In South-East Asia, many women lost their jobs as a result of the financial crisis of the late 1990s, but measures to help workers regain a livelihood were directed mainly at men.

Article 26 refers to the right to education. The enjoyment of this right is best measured in terms of educational outcomes. However, cross-country data on short-run changes in the number of boys and girls, men and women, with particular types of skills and qualifications are scarce. The best that can be done is to look at enrolment rates. During the period 1980–1994, the gap between girls’ enrolments and boys’ enrolments at primary level did indeed narrow in developing countries, but in sub-Saharan Africa this was a result of a fall in the enrolment of both boys and girls, with boys’ enrolment falling further (Colclough et al. 2000:8). This evidence of equalizing down in primary education in sub-Saharan Africa calls into question the validity of the conclusions of the World Bank’s report on *Engendering Development* (2001) on gender and structural adjustment. As discussed above, one of the pieces of evidence invoked to justify the conclusion that on balance females’ absolute status and gender equality improved during structural adjustment was that girls’ schooling rose relative to boys between 1985 and 1990 in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean. In sub-Saharan Africa, according to UNESCO data, the gross primary enrolment rate for girls was 68 in 1980 and 66 in 1990, while that for boys was 87 and 79, respectively (Colclough et al. 2000:8). The gap indeed narrowed—but not in a way that was consistent with the realization of the right to education of either boys or girls. It is essential to look at absolute levels of enrolment of girls as well as at the gender gap if we want to evaluate how far girls have enjoyed the right to education in the neoliberal era.

The World Bank (2001) report does provide some analysis for sub-Saharan Africa, which looks at both gender gaps and absolute levels of primary and secondary enrolment, comparing so-called “adjusting” and “non-adjusting” countries, defined by whether the country ever took a structural adjustment loan from the World Bank. It claims that the trends are similar in both groups of countries, on the basis of population-weighted trends, implying that “adjustment” has had no particularly adverse impact. However, there are two important limitations to this analysis. The first is that a country does not need to take a loan from the World Bank in order to introduce some neoliberal policies. The second is that use of population-weighted averages obscures the accountability of governments for the realization of rights. The outcomes for the “adjusters” group in sub-Saharan Africa are dominated by what happens in Nigeria, which has by far the biggest population in that group.

If we examine progress at the country level, with respect to girls’ enrolment in secondary school, the picture is far from encouraging for about a quarter of countries. UNESCO data show that girls’ net enrolment in secondary school declined between 1985 and 1997 in 10 out of 33 countries in sub-Saharan Africa; 7 out of 11 countries in Central and Western Asia; 2 out of 21 countries in Asia and the Pacific; 6 out of 26 in Latin America and the Caribbean; and 6 out of 9 in Eastern Europe (UNIFEM 2000:69–71).

Overall, the picture with respect to women's enjoyment of specific rights in the neoliberal era is not encouraging. The evidence reviewed above suggests that there has been regress rather than progress in the realization of economic and social rights in many countries, even though in some countries progress has been made.

Article 28 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights suggests we need to go beyond an examination of individual rights to examine whether an enabling environment for the realization of rights is being constructed. Article 22 reinforces that point, stating that "Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to the realization, through national effort and international cooperation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality".

The most recent *World Survey on the Role of Women in Development* (United Nations 1999:ch.5) argues that neoliberal economic policies have transformed the public policy environment in ways that are detrimental to women. Three aspects of this are singled out for comment: a deflationary bias in macroeconomic policies; an increase in economic instability; a reduction in the ability of the state to raise resources for redistribution and social protection (that is, social security). Deflationary bias refers to the way in which governments are pressured by financial markets to cut spending and maintain high interest rates, keeping employment and output growth below their potential. This pressure constrains policy in any country with liberalized capital markets, irrespective of whether or not it is in receipt of stabilization and structural adjustment loans from the IMF and World Bank. Evidence from across the regions is cited in the *World Survey* (United Nations 1999) showing that low growth has more negative effects on women's "formal" employment than on men's. Increased volatility in capital flows has resulted in "booms" followed by financial crises in East Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America. Women have typically borne the brunt of managing household adjustment to these crises and of cushioning their societies against the disintegrative impact of these financial shocks.<sup>14</sup> Governments have been constrained in their ability to provide social protection because of trade liberalization, which reduces import and export taxes, and pressure from mobile capital to reduce corporate, capital gains and income taxes. To keep budget deficits within reasonable bounds, public expenditure has had to be reduced and public services have deteriorated. There has been a "commodification bias" in which it has been assumed that provision by the private sector is inherently better than provision by the public sector for many goods and services (Elson and Cağatay 2000). Neoliberal policies have increased the need for social security against market risks and at the same time reduced the capacity of states to finance this. As a result there has been a retreat<sup>15</sup> from the objective of providing universal forms of social security to the objective of providing only narrowly targeted "social safety nets".

It may be objected that for the poorest women in poor countries nothing much has changed, since they have never enjoyed the benefits of good public services, stable employment and universal social security. Moreover the systems of social protection that did exist were frequently biased in favour of men, who were assumed to be the "breadwinners". Women were assumed to be "dependants" of men, and accessed benefits through husbands or other male relatives (UN 1999; Elson and Cağatay 2000). However,

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<sup>14</sup> Singh and Zammit 2000; Lim 2000; Floro and Dymski 2000; Elson 2001.

<sup>15</sup> See Molyneux and Razavi 2002.

the changing direction of public policy means that the poorest women in poor countries have been deprived of even the prospect of the progressive realization of a non-discriminatory system of decent jobs and public services and broad-based social security systems. That is no longer the object of public policy in most countries. Neoliberal economic thinking suggests that this goal is no longer attainable because of resource constraints. However, while there are indeed real resource constraints on the full achievement of such objectives, the impact of these is much exaggerated. Successive *Human Development Reports* have shown how much more could be done within the constraints of existing resources. It is the constraints on the raising and spending of public money that are the immediate barriers, but these are socially constructed constraints. It is the political, not the natural environment, which inhibits debt cancellation. It is free-market fundamentalism that insists on capital market liberalization.

### **Creating an Enabling Economic Policy Environment for the Realization of Women's Economic and Social Rights**

One way to assist the creation of an enabling environment would be by making a more direct link between economic and social rights and economic policies, rather than treating economic growth as the intermediary. A one-sided focus on economic growth obscures the fact that there can be better realization of economic and social human rights in countries with slow growth than in those with fast growth (for examples, see UNDP 2000). In thinking this through, we might draw upon the ideas of entitlements and entitlement failures developed by Amartya Sen (1981, 1984). These ideas were developed in his work on famine and hunger, but have a wider application, not only for the individual but also for social systems (Elson and Cağatay 2000; Fine 1997).

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights repeatedly states that all human beings are entitled to the rights described therein. The Declaration is a statement of moral entitlements, of rightful claims. There is of course a huge gap for millions of people between their moral entitlements and their practical entitlements—those they actually enjoy. Sen gave the term “entitlement” an economic twist by defining a person’s entitlements in terms of the resources over which they have command: for example, “Entitlement refers to the set of alternative commodity bundles that a person can command in a society using the totality of rights and opportunities that he or she faces” (Sen 1983:18). Sen (1981) explains how entitlements depend upon rights to inherited and legally acquired assets, including health, strength and skills, and property; and rights to use this “endowment” to produce for one’s own consumption or for sale; and rights to goods, service and financial transfers from the state. These comprise a system of entitlement relations. He excludes non-entitlement transfers such as theft, pillage and plunder, and charity. Sen’s concept of entitlements thus includes both production and distribution, both market transactions and provision by the state. It is thus a statement about entitlements that actually exist, rather than a normative statement of moral entitlements.

Command over resources is important to Sen because of its importance to capabilities, to what people are actually able to do and be: “On the basis of this entitlement, a person can acquire some capabilities, i.e. the ability to do this or that (e.g. be well-nourished), and fail to acquire some other capabilities” (Sen 1983:18).<sup>16</sup> The

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<sup>16</sup> See also Nussbaum (2000:ch. 2) for an extended discussion of capabilities.

overarching idea is the capability to live a dignified human life, the same goal as is expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Sen argued that many deaths in famines occurred not because there was an overall insufficiency of food in the country as a whole but because some people were excluded from obtaining food because they could not produce it themselves, could not pay for it in the marketplace and had no institutionalized claim on the state to provide food for them. They died because of entitlement failure. As Sen put it: “Most cases of starvation and famines across the world arise not from people being deprived of things to which they are entitled, but from people not being entitled, in the prevailing legal system of institutional rights, to adequate means for survival” (Sen 1984:348). Although entitlements were defined by Sen on an individual (micro) basis, he also gave the idea a social systemic (macro) dimension, referring to a “network of entitlement relations” (Sen 1981:159). Famine occurred because entitlement failures were endemic in the prevailing social arrangements, so that episodes of bad weather or economic recessions led to a needless loss of people’s ability to live a well-nourished life, which would have been prevented by a better system for sharing resources. A one-sided focus on the fall in food output obscured this important fact.

While Sen has used the idea of entitlement failure only in relation to food and the capability to be well nourished, the concept clearly encompasses the idea of a person’s inability to acquire as of right a set of goods and services that enables them to function at a basic minimum level. More generally, we might extend the idea of entitlement failures to cover all occurrences when the resources a person can obtain as of right are not sufficient to enable that person to avoid deprivation of basic capabilities. Sen himself has not defined such a list but he has referred to poverty as “a deprivation of basic capabilities” reflected in “premature mortality, significant undernourishment, persistent morbidity, widespread illiteracy and other failures” (Sen 1999:20). He argues that criteria for evaluating the enjoyment of capabilities should be generated by an open public discussion (Sen 1999:81). This is congruent with the approach being developed by the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), which monitors the implementation of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (one of the key treaties that put into effect the Universal Declaration of Human Rights). In 1990, the Committee issued General Comment No. 2 on the obligations of states that are party to the covenant, stating that:

The Committee is of the view that a minimum core obligation to ensure the satisfaction of, at the very least, minimum essential levels of each of the rights is incumbent upon every State party. Thus, for example, a State party in which any significant number of individuals is deprived of essential foodstuffs, of essential primary health care, of basic shelter and housing, or of the most basic forms of education, is *prima facie*, failing to discharge its obligations under the Covenant. (CESCR 1990: para. 10)

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has urged states to “consider identifying specific national benchmarks designed to give effect to the minimum core obligation” (OHCHR 1993:3). The specification of such benchmarks in open and democratic debate would provide a framework for setting priorities for resource allocation. Analysis of the system of entitlement relations would permit an identification of potential entitlement failures in relation to these benchmarks. This would form the basis for identifying measures that might be used to avoid such failures, so as to enhance the capabilities of deprived individuals. This is not so ambitious as the approach advocated by Nussbaum (2000:ch.2) in terms of the capabilities to which

priority attention is directed, but it is an approach that helps to focus attention on the system of rights to resources and obligations to secure those rights that must underpin any prospect of widespread enjoyment of basic capabilities.

Sen's entitlement approach has been criticized for putting too much weight on formal legal rights and not paying enough attention to the problems people with little power have in exercising their legal rights (Gasper 1993). It has also been criticized for leaving out the informal gifts of income and property within families and kinship networks, to which people may feel they have moral entitlements (Gore 1993). Scepticism has also been expressed about the absence from Sen's concept of entitlements of the domain of interpersonal care, for which the time and energy is mainly given by women (Staveren 1996).

A key issue relevant to all these comments is the importance of examining the processes through which people articulate and claim their entitlements and recognize their responsibilities, both legal and moral. But in doing this it is important not lose sight of the core idea of the exercise of rights and the dignity that comes from this. To have an entitlement implies access to an accountable process in which the discretion of decision makers is limited. If one's access to a resource is at the arbitrary discretion of a public official or dependent on the favour of a patron or the goodwill of a husband or the price-fixing power of a monopoly supplier, then one does not get that resource as of right. Here it is useful to refer to a recent statement adopted by the CESCR on poverty and human rights:

Critically, rights and obligations demand accountability: unless supported by a system of accountability, they can become no more than windowdressing. Accordingly, the human rights approach to poverty emphasizes obligations and requires that all duty-holders, including States and international organizations, are held to account for their conduct in relation to international human rights law. In its General Comment No. 9, the Committee remarks upon mechanisms of legal accountability for State parties. As for other duty-holders, they must determine which accountability mechanisms are most appropriate in their particular case. However, whatever the mechanisms of accountability, they must be accessible, transparent and effective. (CESCR 2001: para. 14)

This statement usefully reminds us that rights do imply duties. These duties are clearly specified for states that are party to the Declaration, and the human rights treaties stemming from it. They are obliged to protect, promote and fulfil human rights. They are held to account through the mechanisms of the UN Commission on Human Rights and other UN mechanisms. The problem with moral rules on interfamilial transfers, for instance, is that there may be no such clearly specified duties and no clear accountability mechanism, so although one family member may feel they have a moral right to a transfer of income, if other family members do not feel the moral obligation to make this transfer, there is no redress available. This is a particularly important issue for women who are often in a very weak position to exercise "moral rights". One way in which entitlement failure occurs is through "male breadwinner bias", a bias that occurs when men are assumed to be providing for dependent women and children (Elson and Cağatay 2000). Where this bias prevails, women are not entitled to resources in their own right, but only by virtue of their relationship to an adult male. This may fail to provide them with the necessary resources because of their reluctance to ask or to take and the unwillingness or neglect of the relevant men. Some kind of formal or informal public process (which could involve the local community rather than the national government) seems essential for an entitlement to have substance. Any such process must meet the criteria of accessibility, transparency and effectiveness.

The idea of entitlement failures (rather than market failures and bureaucratic failures) offers an alternative normative criterion for judging the effectiveness of procedures for resource allocation from a human rights perspective. This criterion is particularly (though not only) relevant to the fulfilment of core obligations to ensure the satisfaction of at least minimum essential levels of economic and social rights. The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has begun to identify the core obligations arising from the minimum essential levels of the rights to food, education and health, and it has confirmed that these core obligations are “non-derogable”. In other words there is an obligation to fulfil these obligations right now, on the part of states and any others “in a position to assist”. It is not permissible to trade off provision of the goods and services required to fulfil these rights against an increase in the provision of some other goods and services.

In judging the effectiveness of an economic policy regime, we can examine how far the system of entitlement relations that it promotes has adequate safeguards against entitlement failures. Entitlement relations that operate through buying and selling in competitive “liberalized” markets seem to have several advantages: if the market is competitive, access is relatively open and prices are relatively transparent. Moreover, transactions in competitive markets seem to avoid the problem of social dependence. However, the independence that markets seem to provide is an illusion, masking a many-sided dependence on many other people scattered far and wide, whose only social bond is the market. Moreover, such markets are inherently risky and volatile. There is absolutely nothing to guarantee that the prices a person gets for the goods or services they sell (including their labour) will be high enough to enable them to purchase the minimum levels of food, education and health—let alone the requirements for a well-functioning life. Moreover, if the prices are too low, it is not clear who in the market can be held accountable. Responsibility is diffused through many buyers and sellers—none of whom has an overview of the market system—and different decisions made by any one of them acting alone will make no perceptible difference to the outcomes. Everyone can say with truth that they are merely offering the “going rate” for the good or service in question. This diffusion of responsibility gives rise to the illusion that the outcome is a result of ineluctable market forces acting beyond human control, whereas the outcome is in fact the result of human decisions to establish a set of entitlement relations that have no provision for mutual scrutiny of interactions of individual decisions and mutual assurance of social security. The only kind of security that markets offer is through the purchase of private insurance—which is beyond the means of those who need it most. This private security is in turn subject to the inherent risks of markets. Of course other kinds of entitlement relation are also subject to risk, but they tend to be less volatile. Moreover, responsibility for changes tends to be easier to identify.

From women’s point of view, there is a further disadvantage with markets. Since markets cannot recognize the value of goods and services that have no price, they cannot take into account the unpaid work that is mainly done by women in caring for families and reproducing the labour force. Market-based entitlements are thus inherently male-biased and women are penalized because much of their work is non-market work.

Markets can be made less risky and participants in them can be held accountable through appropriate forms of democratic social regulation, enforced by states; and through “socialized” markets in which the cash nexus is embedded in democratic social networks between market participants (Elson 1988, 2000). Minimum wage regulations and controls on the international movement of short-term financial capital are two

important examples of appropriate social regulation. However, the main thrust of the neoliberal policy agenda has been against such regulations, in the name of “efficiency”. It is true that many systems of market regulation have protected the interests of the better-off and the socially powerful (including men as compared to women) and disadvantaged poor people, especially poor women in poor countries. But this is a reflection of the balance of political power that has shaped the regulations, not an inevitable characteristic of regulations. A different policy agenda would have focused on reshaping market regulation to produce democratically enforced regulations designed to promote the human rights of poor people, women equally with men. But even the best markets have to be complemented by other kinds of entitlement relation.

A pragmatic neoliberal might object that regulations that might appear to benefit poor people in fact disadvantage them, if the operation of the market economy as a whole is taken into account. Minimum wage legislation is often argued to be likely to “price poor people out of a job”. What seems to make sense at the individual level looks different at the systemic level. The force of this argument depends on what is assumed about the regulation of the system as a whole. Poor people are much more likely to be priced out of jobs by effective minimum wage regulation in a situation where demand for their labour is low and declining. This tendency can be counteracted by the state in several ways: offering an alternative source of labour demand in the public sector, limiting the ability of businesses to move jobs to another country, and avoiding deflationary bias in macroeconomic policies. The regulatory system has to be looked at as a whole, at both macro and micro levels.

Pragmatic neoliberals do recognize that competitive markets are risky—which is why they advocate state provision of targeted social safety nets. But there are several problems with this kind of residual provision: there may be no minimum standards; access is determined by public officials operating means tests of various kinds; criteria are often complex and difficult to understand; public officials may exercise such discretion that the claimant has very few, if any, rights, so that the provision is not properly described as an entitlement. The effectiveness of such provision in meeting needs is limited by the unwillingness of the better-off to pay taxes to finance services that they do not themselves make use of, and by the stigmatization of those claiming such provision, so that they become less willing to make those claims.

A safety net system accords greater moral value to making claims for resources on other people (outside one’s family) via the market rather than via the state. This depends on the illusion (noted above) that exercising entitlements via the market constitutes providing for oneself, being independent, not being a burden on others; whereas making claims via the state entails being dependent. This ideological dimension of the neoliberal agenda has considerable social power and may result in a sense of social exclusion on the part of those who have recourse to the safety net. It also results in many people not claiming the resources to which they are legally entitled.

Universal state-based entitlements that are equally available to all members of a society are likely to be more accessible, more transparent, and more effective. Claiming such entitlements is not stigmatizing. It is not taken as a sign of failure or dependency. Universal entitlements are more secure than narrowly targeted safety nets or market entitlements. They can be changed by the political process and their real value may be eroded by rising prices, but the majority of citizens have a stake in maintaining them, not just poor people. It is clear that the government has responsibility for these entitlements and must be held accountable for them. Such entitlements are a form of mutual

assurance against entitlement failure and symbolize citizenship as a social bond. Of course such entitlements do demand a society willing to pay taxes, but this willingness is more likely to be forthcoming if everyone stands to gain; and they do raise issues of individual work incentives to produce the goods and services that are required to make them a reality. But they are essential in ensuring sufficient supply of public good.

Public goods are goods whose benefits spill over to those who do not directly utilize them—education is clearly one important example, and so are many health services, such as those directed to improving maternal health or reducing the incidence of infectious diseases. But the category of public goods is broader than this. The public service ethos could be considered a public good, since its cultural values of mutuality and obligation, which are vital for the realization of human rights, spill over into areas of life beyond the public sector itself and inform the whole political culture. Of course, not every public sector is imbued with a public service ethos; many public services have been run largely for the private benefit of public sector workers. But an alternative policy agenda would be concerned with nurturing and promoting such an ethos rather than minimizing its potential field of activities.

Support for the production of public goods is often deficient from the point of view of women's rights because one of the most important public goods in any community is not recognized because it is produced in private. This public good is the unpaid care and socialization of children, whose benefits spread well beyond the individual children who receive the care, to employers, neighbours, and indeed permeate the whole society (Folbre 1994). Investment in public provision of a range of complementary services (clean water, sanitation, electricity, paved streets, health services, as well as child care itself) is important to ensure that those caring for children on an unpaid basis have adequate resources to ensure that they and the children enjoy a progressive realization of their human rights, and that society as a whole benefits from generations of children who have been well cared for. Instead there has been a “reprivatization” of this work of social reproduction (Bakker 2001).

An enabling system of well-regulated and socially responsive markets and universal entitlements for all members of society, designed to avoid male breadwinner bias and commodification bias, depends not only on micro-level policy but also on macro-level fiscal and monetary policy, which sets some of the parameters that constrain individual entitlements. If fiscal and monetary policies are inappropriate there can be macro-level entitlement failure, in which macro policy leads to multiple entitlement failure in both markets and public provision. The neoliberal policy agenda prioritizes the danger of systemic entitlement failure through high rates of inflation. “Sound” policy is policy that minimizes this risk. But it downplays the risk of systemic entitlement failure through deflationary bias resulting in high levels of unemployment and underemployment. It embraces a miserly macroeconomics in which budget surpluses (or speedy deficit reduction) are seen as the top priority, and lower levels of taxation and public expenditure are typically preferred (Elson and Cağatay 2000). Of course, hyperinflation does erode entitlements, but hyperinflation is usually the result of “populist” policies that fail to place sufficient emphasis on increasing revenue. The avoidance of hyperinflation does not entail massive reductions in public provision. It requires building the social capacity to finance adequate levels of public provision. As Amartya Sen has put it:

Financial conservatism has good rationale and imposes strong requirements, but its demands must be interpreted in the light of the overall objectives of public policy. The role of public expenditure in generating and guaranteeing many basic capabilities calls for



attention; it must be considered along with the instrumental need for macroeconomic stability. Indeed, the latter need must be assessed *within* a broad framework of social objectives. (Sen 1999:141, emphasis in original)

A major problem in doing this is that macroeconomic policy is constructed in the neoliberal agenda as something beyond social dialogue and public debate. The fundamentalists want to take it beyond debate by writing rigid rules for balanced budgets into state constitutions (Gill 2001). The pragmatists organize it as a technocratic exercise in short-term balancing of financial flows, with key decisions increasingly handed over to “independent” central banks, which have little political accountability. Bakker describes a “high priesthood” of economists wielding mathematical models, carrying the same message to every country “as if the truth were carved in stone” (2001:5). The World Bank recently produced a Comprehensive Development Framework which was supposed to promote dialogue and coordination among a range of social actors, but the dialogue did not include macroeconomic policy, which instead was treated as a parameter (Elson and Cağatay 2000). The IMF refers to the importance of the “national authorities” explaining the economic reform programme to the public and building a “national consensus” to support the programme—which sounds much more like “selling” a preformulated programme than involving the public in creating the programme (Elson and Cağatay 2000). These suspicions are confirmed by a recent report to the UN Commission on Human Rights (Cheru 2001) on the implementation of the Highly Indebted Poor Countries Initiative. The report concludes that IMF and World Bank staff involved in the preparation of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), which must be developed in order to qualify for debt relief, see the process as “essentially technocratic”. It notes that: “While civil society groups have been invited to participate extensively in discussions on the social policy-planning component of the I-PRSP, they have effectively been excluded when it comes to discussions on the content of macroeconomic policy choices” (Cheru 2001:14). It further notes that “there is still a tendency to design macroeconomic policy with a focus on market-based criteria and financial concerns. This tendency always leads to a situation where social and human development and equity concerns take a back seat to financial considerations” (Cheru 2001:15). The PRSPs reviewed in the report mainly emphasize downsizing the public sector and introducing cost-recovery measures, such as user charges, and fail to show how such measures will reduce poverty. The picture that emerges indicates that the macroeconomic policy process associated with heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC) does not conform to the accountability criteria set out by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (United Nations 2001:para.14). It is not accessible, transparent and effective in realizing human rights.

Some pragmatic neoliberal economists see a little more room for manoeuvre than do IMF economists. Bevan and Adam (2000), for instance, are concerned to identify what scope there is for consultation and participation in macroeconomic policy in poor indebted countries. They do find some scope for participation in determining the composition of government spending and the extent of the net resource inflow from donors, but not in determining the structure and level of tax rates and the size of the domestic budget deficit and its financing. With respect to taxes, they state that “a powerful consensus has developed as to the appropriate design of tax systems...[including] not only the structure of taxes, but also the level of tax rates. This conventional wisdom is probably pretty soundly based, and so to refuse to subscribe to it would be imprudent as well as incurring disapproval from the IFIs”. It seems an extraordinary weakening of democracy to leave the determination of taxes to a “powerful [Washington] consensus”:

social dialogue about taxation is surely a key part of any democratic polity. Bevan and Adam do agree that there is scope for choice in many countries about the size and financing of the budget deficit but “it does not seem appropriate to see this as a participatory issue rather than as a technical judgement by government” (2000:3). Nor do they consider participation in setting macroeconomic targets. They take it for granted that there will be an inflation target: “the target rate of inflation is fundamental to the macroeconomic framework”. Other targets typically include net foreign exchange reserves, money supply, domestic credit to the private sector, and the budget deficit. Poverty reduction is brought into the macroeconomic framework through growth rates.

Much more innovative approaches are being developed in a number of NGO initiatives on participatory development of alternative national budgets and budget processes (Cağatay et al. 2000). In Bangladesh, the Institute for Development Policy Analysis at Proshika conducted a participatory study of people’s understanding of budget issues and the impact of the budget on their livelihoods. It subsequently made recommendations on participation in the production of the Bangladesh budget—including the democratization of priority setting, pre-budget consultations with civil society, gathering public feedback on expenditure choices from citizen juries, and strengthening the capacities of parliamentary budget committees. In Canada, an Alternative Federal Budget has been prepared each year since 1995 through consultation between a wide range of labour, social and community organizations. It includes alternative taxation and monetary policy to achieve a range of social goals, including gender equality and the protection of human rights. It aims to improve the entitlements of a wide range of disadvantaged people, focusing not only on market-based entitlements through growth and full employment but also on universal gender-equitable state-based entitlements through public services and public income transfers.

Gender equality is being addressed through a wide range of gender budget initiatives in both developed and developing countries, some organized outside government and some inside government.<sup>17</sup> These initiatives have been particularly concerned with analysing the gender distribution of budget benefits and burdens, and ensuring that government budgets are more oriented to the needs and priorities of women, especially poor women. Many of them, especially those involving parliamentarians and members of women’s organizations, also emphasize the right to information about budgets and promote measures to make budget processes more accountable to women. They exchange information and experiences across international boundaries and promote more open dialogue about economic policies. They resist the idea that a market calculus is the final arbiter of policy and insist on the democratization of economic policy.

Such gender budget initiatives offer scope for making a direct link between economic policy and the realization of women’s rights. They could promote an analysis of the effects of government tax and spending on women’s entitlements, both to state services and transfers and market-based entitlements. They could highlight the areas of entitlement failure and put forward alternative policies to prevent entitlement failure. They offer the opportunity to capitalize upon the gains that women have made in civil and political rights to begin on the work of transforming the economic policy agenda. They are limited, it is true, by the external constraints placed upon each country by its

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<sup>17</sup> Budlender 2000; Sharp 1999; see also <http://www.gender-budgets.org>.

positioning in the international financial system. But they also have the potential to contribute to the loosening of these constraints by rebuilding confidence in the possibility of well-organized, fair and accountable public finances and services, and by mobilizing women to demand that prevention of entitlement failure has to take precedence as the goal of international financial policy.

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## Chapter 3

# Policy Discourses on Women's Land Rights in Sub-Saharan Africa: The Implications of the (Re)turn to the Customary<sup>1</sup>

*Ann Whitehead<sup>2</sup> and Dzodzi Tsikata<sup>3</sup>*

(2003)

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### Introduction

This chapter examines the content of some contemporary policy discourses about land tenure reform in sub-Saharan Africa, both in general and specifically as it relates to women's interests in land. We identify a developing debate about the potential of so-called customary systems of land tenure to meet the needs of all land users and claimants of land use rights and go on to examine the implications of this return to the customary for achieving gender justice with respect to land. Local populations all over Africa are being affected by pressure on land resources. In most cases this represents a historical shift from relative land abundance to relative land scarcity, a change that has occurred, or is occurring, throughout the subcontinent. Although there are still some rural regions where suitable land is not all under agricultural use, these tend to be areas poorly served by markets and where the commercialization of agriculture is low. African countries differ widely with respect to contemporary levels of land scarcity. In the context of an absolute rise in total populations, the severity of land scarcity depends on a country's particular experiences of the colonial appropriation of land, of the commercial development of agriculture and of the nature and degree of urbanization. This chapter is heavily weighted toward British post-colonial states and confines itself to rural land issues. Many regions are experiencing growing conflicts between land users and they, together with national and international policy makers, are increasingly concerned with growing land access

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<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing, Ann Whitehead was Lecturer in Social Anthropology at the University of Sussex. She has written extensively on the effects of economic change on gender relations, especially with respect to sub-Saharan Africa.

<sup>3</sup> At the time of writing, Dzodzi Tsikata was Research Fellow at the Institute of Statistical, Social and Economic Research (ISSER) of the University of Ghana. Her research interests are broadly in the area of gender, state policy and livelihoods.

problems and land conflicts all over the continent. A burgeoning policy debate about land tenure issues—described by Quan as reforms “which change tenurial relations between land owners and land users without necessarily altering land distribution” (Quan 1997:1)—is evident. Recent land tenure reform has been undertaken, or is under way, in a number of countries, including Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Malawi, Niger, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe, and international donors have been heavily involved in the design of these reforms. In many countries, government proposals have sparked off considerable activity by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society about land issues, which has been picked up and commented upon by international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In some cases land is an important focus for radical and democratizing struggles, as land scarcity bites and land conflicts take on an international character, as for example throughout the 1990s when land was annexed for tourist enterprises and [mineral] extraction.

An important minority voice in these national debates is that of African feminists and women’s advocates, and international gender and development experts and advocates, who have long sought to promote better and more secure land access for rural African women. Most rural African women play a substantial part in primary agricultural production, making the complex of local norms, customary practices, statutory instruments and laws that affect their access to and interests in land very significant (not only to them, their dependants and their male relatives, but also arguably to levels of agricultural production). Although there are discernable common features, local-level empirical studies demonstrate great diversity and complexity in women’s land interests and in the factors affecting these. In addition, norms and practices about women’s land access, as well as who gets land, how much and from whom, are not static but have changed and are changing over time. Our primary concern is not with this level of analysis—although as a setting for our discussion the next section considers, through a gender lens, some of the main features of rural land access and use. After this, the policy discourses of some of the main protagonists in current debates about tenure reform are explored. We consider, first, the World Bank and discuss documents from its Land Policy Division and from several of its gender specialists and, second, Oxfam Great Britain (Oxfam GB) and the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), as two UK-based organizations that have been very active for a number of years on land policy issues. Third, we consider the approaches and discourses of African and Africanist feminist legal specialists. Throughout these accounts, we highlight and explore historical shifts in thinking and the evidential and theoretical, as well as political and ideological, factors affecting these shifts. These sections demonstrate a developing consensus among the non-gender specialists toward encouraging the evolution of customary practices to deal with conflict and disputes over land access. Gender specialists are divided. Some argue that a reformed and strengthened customary law is in women’s interests, but the majority reject this and instead argue for women’s land and property rights to be enshrined in statutory law. In the final section of the chapter, we examine the idea of reforming and building on customary law from the perspective of gender justice, outlining some important problems that we think the return to customary law will pose for contemporary African rural women.



## **African Land Access and Use: A Gendered Discussion**

The scholarship on land issues in sub-Saharan Africa is both deep and wide, with developed and sophisticated literatures from several disciplinary perspectives and a large policy literature.<sup>4</sup> None of these can be read simply or innocently. They diagnose and describe circumstances of profound and complex change, on the basis of empirical evidence that has been produced out of the negotiations between actors with widely different access to the political, economic and technical resources required to record history. Most of the historical evidence about the local level was collected after rural localities had been affected by colonialism, as had the research and official communities that played a large part in the production of the written records. The recent writings of anthropologists and historians have emphasized the ways in which the perspectives, concepts and meanings attached to African forms of land tenure arise as much from the framework of colonial history and the forms of evidence this produced, as from the nature of landholding itself. These kinds of nuances are rarely found in the policy-focused writings of land tenure experts. As a result, many implicit and explicit contestations over meaning run through the literature.

### ***“Individual” land access and Kenya’s experience of registered individual titles***

Today, most rural areas of the subcontinent have active land markets, although it is important to distinguish between formal market transactions, where titled land is bought and sold, and other kinds of informal transaction, which form the bulk of land transfers. All the sources agree that the growth of land markets has not and does not require formalized property rights and they also document the multiple, though often limited, forms of local land markets.<sup>5</sup> Informal transactions can include a wide variety of loans, leases, sharecropping contracts, exchanges and pledges, while in some places, forms of sale take place in the absence of registered titles (Bosworth 1995). These kinds of transactions have a long history under so-called customary systems of tenure, but they are interpreted in very different ways in the literature. Bosworth, who in the mid-1990s studied land transactions in south Kigezi in Uganda, where population densities are very high, warns against seeing them as the emergence of individual rights (Bosworth 1995). She is at pains to distinguish herself from authors such as Feder and Noronha who see individual rights as a long established feature of African landholding systems and informal market transactions as evidence of these individual rights (Feder and Noronha 1987).

These contestations about whether individual rights exist outside registered titles, and their longevity, pivot around perspectives on “the evolution” of African land tenure, a language that also has a long history in this context and that has been particularly powerful in policy. Chanock, in an account of the development of colonial property law in Africa, argues that from early on, British colonial administrators developed a common framework for understanding tenurial systems that dominated the colonial period, “fitting like a grid over events” (Chanock 1991a:73). In this evolutionary framework, indigenous African landholding was viewed as “communal” and individual proprietary ownership was interpreted as a more developed form of land tenure linked to the

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<sup>4</sup> Basset and Crummey 1993; Berry 1992, 1993; Bruce and Migot-Adholla 1994; Chanock 1991b; Deininger and Binswanger 1999; Downs and Reyna 1988; Falk-Moore 1998; Feder and Feeny 1991; IIED 1999; McAuslan 1996; Mackenzie 1998; Migot-Adholla et al. 1991; Okoth-Ogendo 1989, 1998; Platteau 1996; Shipton and Goheen 1992; Toulmin and Quan 2000a.

<sup>5</sup> Reyna 1987; Shipton 1988; Bruce and Migot-Adholla 1994; Heck 1996; Platteau 1996; Toulmin and Quan 2000a.

development of market exchange.<sup>6</sup> In British colonial administrative discourse, societies were understood to have progressed on a grand and rather long-term scale from communal to individual forms of landholding; conversely, the type of land tenure of particular colonial societies was thought to indicate the level reached within this evolutionary progression. Bassett argues that early British colonialists used this idea of the communal nature of African land tenure to gain ultimate control over land, establishing the legal right to alienate land by creating Crown land and by declaring that “vacant” lands belonged to the State (Bassett 1993). Cultivators were dispossessed in Eastern and Southern Africa, where European settlers and companies were provided with land to farm, on which Western property categories of freehold and leasehold were conferred. Formal legal pluralism, with customary and statutory law established and constructed as two separate systems, was an essential element in these policies. Bassett also argues that, up until the 1930s, colonial authorities did not wish to transform communal to individual tenure for Africans, but wanted to preserve what they described as customary rights in the interests of political stability, which was the paramount colonial objective. When in the 1930s colonial administrators became more interested in developing African agriculture, this self-same colonially constructed customary tenure “was increasingly viewed as an impediment to growth” and “a major obstacle to realizing production goals”, and they began to promote land tenure reform on the basis of individual ownership in African held land areas (Bassett 1993:12). At this point, individual land tenure became firmly embedded in modernizing discourses about agricultural intensification and economic growth. The more developed form of land tenure—freehold tenure and individual property—offered “the most propitious conditions for agricultural investment” (Bassett 1993:12) (see footnote 15).

In a further, latter-day evolutionary model, extensively discussed by Platteau (which he calls the evolutionary theory of land tenure/ETLT), modernizing discourses and the evolution of individual land tenure are also closely linked (Platteau 1992, 1996, 2000). The ETLT, prominent in policy discussions from the 1980s onward, contends that population pressure, together with commercialization of agriculture, puts great pressure on land resources and leads to increased individualization of land access, increased conflicts between land users and a growing demand from them for more formal property rights (that is, from “below”). In response, states step in to initiate formal systems of registered individual ownership. In the ETLT, this in turn promotes greater security, reduces the incidence of conflict and sets in train a number of economic benefits—the accelerated development of the land market, investment in land and in agriculture, reallocation to more efficient producers and ultimately greater capital accumulation and government revenue.

The most important case study of the link between individual titled ownership and positive economic effects is Kenya, where the registration of rights for Africans to land in individual freehold title began in the 1950s and continued to be official policy until very recently. Several commentators on the history of Kenya’s land tenure policy suggest that the highly influential Swynnerton Plan for Kenyan agriculture (Swynnerton 1954), which set in motion colonial land tenure reform, was concerned not only with the benefits of formal titling for improving agricultural productivity, but also, and perhaps equally, with

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Lugard 1922:280–281, quoted in Chanock 1991a. Chanock suggests that the central idea of the communality of earlier resource access rules owed much to the British Colonial Service’s familiarity with the work of nineteenth-century legal theorists, such as Maine.

the potential of these economic policies to undermine the widespread political instability (Heyer and Williams n.d.; Platteau 1996).<sup>7</sup> Heyer and Williams argue that land tenure reform in Kenya was part of a plan to create a new agricultural class of yeoman farmers as a response to the rebellions in Central Province in the 1950s. After independence, the new government was equally attached to a modernizing agenda. Registration and titling continued throughout the 1960s and 1970s, as part of agricultural and land policies justified on almost identical grounds as those of the colonial state (Platteau 1996; Okoth-Ogendo 2000).

As registration of titles proceeded, concern about their effects grew and many case studies in the 1980s found bountiful evidence to criticize free-market modernizing approaches to tenure reform.<sup>8</sup> A repeated finding was that land registration had promoted inequality and enhanced insecurity: “land titling can be said to supply a mechanism for transfer of wealth in favour of the educated economic and political elite” “land titling opens up new possibilities of conflict and insecurity” (Platteau 2000:68). This finding from Kenya is supported by Atwood’s wider overview, which concludes that, wherever it has been introduced in sub-Saharan Africa, titling creates greater uncertainty and conflict (Atwood 1990): “[W]omen, pastoralists, hunter-gatherers, and low-caste people, former slaves and people belonging to minority tribes etc.” (Platteau 2000:66) were particular groups whose customary claims were denied recognition during registration processes (Green 1987). Vulnerability increased as land access became much more insecure (Platteau 2000; Quan and Toulmin 2000). On the other side of the coin, research on the economic effects is summarized by Platteau as showing “no clearly discernible impact on investment behaviour” (Platteau 2000:57). Far from getting greater efficiency, the absentee owners and urban educated elites who scrambled for titles in the early period of registration “farm inefficiently and under-cultivate the land” (Platteau 2000:57), and there had been paradoxical effects with respect to credit.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Land in post-independence states***

The considerable continuity between colonial and post-colonial land and agricultural policies found in Kenya is much more widely applicable. Most post-independence governments in ex-British and French colonies continued the land policies of their previous regimes. “Nationalization in the early years is followed by a set of policies to grant private title and redistribute land and more recently, to ‘decentralize’ land management and grant some form of recognition to customary rights” (Toulmin and Quan 2000b:11). Few, if any, relinquished the states’ rights to land appropriated to establish and maintain colonial political sovereignty, nor could they resist the appeal of the wide-ranging potential for political patronage.<sup>10</sup> Land remained and remains a significant weapon in power struggles within many African states (Platteau 1996). In the first decades of independence, many governments seized land for infrastructure development and state-owned agricultural projects—a period also marked by land grabbing

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<sup>7</sup> The main outlines of Swynnerton’s blueprint for Kenya are reproduced in a subsequent policy document covering East Africa as a whole (EARC 1955).

<sup>8</sup> Haugerud 1983; Bruce 1986; Green 1987; Shipton 1988; Barrows and Roth 1989. Sorrenson (1967) is one of very few commentators on the Kenyan experience of titling who is positive about it.

<sup>9</sup> Platteau 2000, citing Green 1987; Shipton 1988; Barrows and Roth 1989.

<sup>10</sup> Mamdani 1996; Shivji 1998; Alden Wiley 2000; Lavigne Delville 2000; Okoth-Ogendo 2000; Toulmin and Quan 2000b; Moyo 2002.

by political and economic elites.<sup>11</sup> These processes were aided by very poor and inefficient land administration, with many opportunities for abuse and corruption offered by the post-colonial systems of statutory land law and administration, which Okoth-Ogendo (2000) describes as poorly understood, especially in their differences from those in the ex-colonial metropolises.

The Kenya experience also throws the spotlight on how the relation between statutory and customary law worked in practice and the extraordinary complexity of the legacy of the pluralistic legal orders as post-independence unfolded. Some of the problems in Kenya were that formal land registration did not work very well in tandem with local practices. It was time-consuming and costly, so that as time went on, the land registers became increasingly at variance with possession and use, and “a gap developed between the control of rights as reflected in the land register and control of rights as recognized between most local communities” (Barrows and Roth 1989:7, cited in Platteau 2000:61). Confusion was created and the land law “failed to gain popular understanding and acceptance”. Moreover, “the state has decided to retreat from radical interpretations of freehold tenure and to revert to some customary principles” (Platteau 2000:63). Haugerud (1989), Mackenzie (1993), Pinckey and Kimuya (1994) all suggest that land boards “are frequently reluctant to permit transactions that would leave families and their descendants landless and destitute” (Platteau 2000:63). Despite the existence of registered titles, access to the majority of plots was through inheritance or unregistered sales, lending and gifts.<sup>12</sup>

This interpenetration of statutory and customary systems at the local level is borne out by studies of the effects on women’s land access of the introduction of registered title and the new systems of land administration.<sup>13</sup> Although Lastarria-Cornhiel summarizes that “usually women lose access or cultivation rights while male household heads have strengthened their hold over land” (Lastarria-Cornhiel 1997:1326), Mackenzie’s historical study of the different ways in which the land reform of the 1950s had affected patrilineal Kikuyu women’s land claims in Central Province gives a more detailed and nuanced picture (Mackenzie 1990, 1993, 1998). Women’s claims to use land as wives and as daughters were becoming insecure as the area was experiencing severe land shortage and land was becoming commoditized. Some of her cases showed that lineage land given to men on marriage was still managed on a day-to-day basis by women, but it was now registered in the name of the husband who thereby gained more exclusive rights over its disposal. As the married couple purchased land out of their joint efforts, this land too could be registered in the name of the husband. The strength of the claim that wives had to land through marriage was implicitly diminished, especially in the light of the difficulties that a small group of elite women faced trying to purchase land in their own names. Although the land reforms could support daughters’ inheritances within their patrilineages, these practices were coming under growing pressure from the subclan, which wanted to consolidate land interest within their own groups. Mackenzie thus concludes that land reform had increased men’s resistance to women’s control over land,

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<sup>11</sup> Several authors have noted how new sprees of land grabbing by urban elites took place in different states and in different periods, especially when state funds were being spent on agricultural modernization. See, for example, Goody (1980) and Shepherd (1981), who describe the rash of absentee landowners on land being used for commercial rice-growing in Ghana’s northern region in the 1970s. These were mainly southern-based state employees and entrepreneurs who persuaded local chiefs to give them access to so-called customary land.

<sup>12</sup> Haugerud 1983; Green 1987; Shipton 1988; Barrows and Roth 1989; Mackenzie 1993.

<sup>13</sup> Mackenzie 1990, 1993; Haugerud 1989; Davison 1988a; Karanja 1991; Fleuret 1988; Shipton 1988.

while increasing women's insecurities. Registration and titling diminish women's land access in this example by encouraging a single registered owner, and providing a new legal arena for gender conflicts, but it did not extinguish customary claims on land. In addition, it gave a new context for claims in the language of custom and "men found they were able to manipulate the historical precedents of "custom" to exercise greater control over land to the detriment of women" (Mackenzie 1993:213; see also Yngstrom 2002).

### **Legal pluralism and "customary" tenure**

There now exists a considerable debate within the academic literature on law and legal theory about the nature of Africa's legal pluralism.<sup>14</sup> Woodman (1985) points out that there is a dominant centrist legal conception that views statutory law as a proper and higher form of law and customary law as a residual subordinated category.<sup>15</sup> Woodman describes this as "lawyers' customary law" and contrasts it with "sociologists' customary law" "the former referring to that law applied within the state courts, the latter to that which is socially recognized outside" (Manuh 1994, citing Woodman 1985:215). African states are routinely described as legally pluralist and customary law as constructed, but sources differ widely in what is meant by this. Much rural landholding is characterized by informal local-level practices and normative principles, usually called customary tenure arrangements.<sup>16</sup> These coexist within the nation state with others that are guaranteed by statutory law and in some states with other legal orders based on religious law. Colonial legal pluralism consisted of a formal, and sometimes constitutional, recognition of customary practices, in which these practices were systematized and placed within a framework of recognized institutionalized dispute settlement procedures.<sup>17</sup> In many of today's national legal orders, the constitution and statutory law *prescribe* the nature and broad competencies of the customary system, specifying the scope of its practices and processes. For legal centrists, customary law may be constructed, but there is nothing wrong with that. After all, its contemporary existence is palpable and sculpted and guaranteed by the statutory.

However for many other commentators, there are more broad-ranging and significant differences between the customary and statutory systems. The formal system of local dispute settlement forums, together with a body of rules about the principles of adjudication, introduced by colonial states was far from a simple formalization of existing local-level practices. Formalizing its content also changed it. "Despite official interest in preserving 'native law and custom' the interpretation of customary tenure was quite narrow, influenced as it was by European notions of proprietary ownership. The search for individual landowners, the redrawing of community boundaries...created new rights and conditions of access that became the subject of considerable dispute" (Berry 1997). Many of the supposed central tenets of African land tenure, such as the

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<sup>14</sup> Woodman 1985; Manuh 1994; Griffiths 1997, 1998, 2001; Manji 1999; Wilson 2000.

<sup>15</sup> Interesting insights into this process are to be found in Griffiths' (2001) account of the discourses of othering and difference present in the historical devolution of these conflicts to a realm of custom.

<sup>16</sup> Lavigne Delville provides an interesting discussion of what these should be called: "Researchers prefer to talk about local landholding systems, conforming to...socially determined land use rules...There is no system that is traditional or customary in itself, but there are forms of land management based on custom"(1999:2).

<sup>17</sup> In writing in this very general way on the basis of sources that seek to generalize, we are conscious of Anne Phillips's caution about the dangers of producing a much too coherent account of what was often a very messy and contradictory set of policies. As she notes, colonial policy was "necessarily makeshift" (1989:11) and so different in different states, despite recourse to often highly uniform analyses of the economic, social and political situations of particular states.

idea of communal tenure, the hierarchy of recognized interests in land (ownership, usufructory rights and so on), or the place of chiefs and elders, have been shown to have been largely created and sustained by colonial policy and passed on to post-colonial states.<sup>18</sup> In addition, the content of so-called customary rules reflected only some of the voices of indigenous society. In Chanock's well-known interpretation, what came to be the content and procedures of customary law were generated out of a compromise and uneasy alliance between the power holders of African indigenous societies and colonial powers (Chanock 1985).

In centrist models of legal pluralism, customary law comes not only to have a static and oversystemic character, but also an *overly legal* one. Many legal specialists see the customary as a separate system that has rules of adjudication and other features similar to those in the statutory system (Griffiths 2001). Many terms with distinct meanings in Western law are then used to describe characteristics of customary systems. The model is one of dualism, albeit of an unequal kind. This dualism—in which customary law is seen as a different kind of primarily legal system carrying out many of the same functions as for formal law—is one of the most common modalities in which policy advocates describe customary systems. For example, Bruce and Migot-Adholla say: “in land tenure...two sometimes conflicting sources of legitimacy, philosophy and rules have come to govern land tenure” (Bruce and Migot-Adholla 1994). An example here is the use of rights language to describe land claims in indigenous systems. “Generally, individual families enjoyed fairly clearly defined spatial and temporal rights of use over different parcels of cultivated land. Such family rights were transmitted to succeeding generations in accordance with prevailing rules of succession” (Migot-Adholla and Bruce 1994:5). By using the term rights, Migot-Adholla and Bruce imply that the claims made by persons against each other with respect to land are strong and unambiguous.<sup>19</sup> For anthropologists and historians, local-level systems of dispute settlement are not really “law” at all, but practices that are processual as well as being socially embedded. They use more circumspect language, implying, for example, that the language of “rights” may be inappropriate. Translating local-level ideas into the term “rights” gives an erroneous impression that the claims are similar. In this vein, Bosworth, referred to earlier, argues that there is no Bakiga word corresponding to the English word “rights” (Bosworth 1995).

### ***The implications of social embeddedness***

Many of the differences between African local-level legal processes around land claims and statutory processes arise from the socially embedded nature of land access. Continent-wide, socio-legal practices with respect to land and modes of gaining access to it are very diverse—although there is broad general agreement within the historical and anthropological literature that African systems of land access were socially embedded, created by use and negotiated, and that to some extent they remain so today.<sup>20</sup> Although overwhelmingly individuals and households got access to land through intergenerational succession, most claims were claims to use and community-level patterns of land use were

<sup>18</sup> Okoth-Ogendo 1989; Derry 1992, 1993, 2000; Shipton and Goheen 1992; Bosworth 1995; McAuslan 1996; Lavigne Delville 1999; Yngstrom 1999; Heyer and Williams n.d.

<sup>19</sup> See Whitehead 1984 for a discussion of how to conceptualize the subjects of resource claims in pre-modern kinship systems.

<sup>20</sup> Land access is used here in the loose sense of the ability to make claims on land and not in the narrow sense of the character of a particular interest acquired in a piece of land.

not rigid, but flexible and negotiable.<sup>21</sup> Control and ownership rights in which land could be alienated from the social groups with claims to use it were limited. Within kinship groups and households, claims to use were made by men and women for land inherited within these social groups, while between them, claims could also be made on a number of bases. Pawning, pledging and loaning provided access to land for use without undermining the flow of land through inheritance, and most communities also had ways in which in-migrants could make claims to land that was not already assigned. The land as a natural resource also provided different kinds of utility, often for different groups of people. In all these cases the claims to use and dispose of land arose out of social relations (out of relations between people), rather than out of property relations (relations between people and things).

Multiple socially embedded land claims have produced the widespread description of land in African tenure systems as subject to a bundle of rights, but this designation is coming under increasing scrutiny in recent historical and anthropological scholarship. The description of African land tenure as a bundle of rights, used in the colonial period to underline the different character of various kinds of land claims, is modelled on Western jurisprudence.<sup>22</sup> One distinction often made is between landownership and various categories of use rights, with use rights defined as belonging to members of a landowning group and ownership as vested in political leaders on behalf of their groups. This formulation, which was in the past embedded in ideas of communal ownership, generated conflicts between political leaders and persons with use rights.<sup>23</sup> The different kinds of interests between use and disposal in African land tenure do not properly correspond to the Western jurisprudential distinction between ownership and usufruct, and the collapse of these differences in colonial anthropology and today is misleading. A significant contestation in current policy discourses is between those who describe multiple claims in land as a bundle of rights that are hierarchically ordered, in which some are primary and some secondary (especially the distinction between claims to cultivate, or otherwise use, as against claims to alienate, or otherwise control), and those who, while arguing that there are multiple claims, reject the core distinction between primary and secondary claims and their hierarchical ordering. These latter authors stress instead the negotiated dynamic and fluid nature of the tenure relations and tenure claims and treat their socially embedded nature in radically different ways.<sup>24</sup>

### **Women's land claims**

Whether land is subject to hierarchically ordered claims and the meaning of social embeddedness are very important in understanding the gender aspects of land access. Women have long had access to land in sub-Saharan Africa, but men and women have rarely, if ever, had identical kinds of claims to land—largely because the genders have very

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<sup>21</sup> This is attributed to the relative land abundance that characterized much of sub-Saharan Africa in the past. This land abundance is closely linked to agricultural technology and practices. Examples of areas with forms of intensive land use of relatively long duration include the dry zones of northern Nigeria and some of the areas of the Barotse plain. In both cases more restricted kinds of land use access came in (Gluckman 1941; Hill 1972).

<sup>22</sup> Western jurisprudential ideas also had a strong influence on anthropological accounts of law in the colonial period—for example, Meek 1946; Gluckman 1943, 1965; Fallers 1969.

<sup>23</sup> Mamdani (1996) argues that control over land was an important area of struggle between the colonial state and the kinship/chieftaincy-based political institutions. He argues that there were differences in the outcomes of these struggles for various societies and suggests that in a large number of cases, kin groups succeeded in maintaining their control over land, marginalizing the state.

<sup>24</sup> See, for instance, Falk-Moore 1975; Berry 1989; Okoth-Ogendo 1989; Moore and Vaughan 1994; Lavigne Delville 1999.

differentiated positions within the kinship systems that are the primary organizing order for land access.<sup>25</sup> It is striking that there is no recognized formal category for the particular character of women's land access. Marriage is one important site for women's claims to land, and many authors report that husbands devolve land to their wives for farming. However, other authors find that it is from the husband's kin groups that wives get land, and it is this kin group that may in some circumstances protect her claims. Women often also retain some residual land claims in their own kin groups, as well as frequently obtaining land by loan or gift from a wider circle of social ties. That women get land through many social relations bears emphasis because some policy discussions assert that women get access to land as wives and go on to argue that their claims are weak because of this.

Several recent studies of gendered land access that have examined land disputes and court cases suggest not only that women's claims to land are much more diverse but also that women's claims to land are much stronger than usually represented.<sup>26</sup> Ironically, for those who link social embeddedness with women's *weaker* claims, the empirically demonstrated strength of women's claims seems to lie precisely in their social embeddedness.<sup>27</sup> These authors contest the idea that women's indigenous land claims are secondary, or amount simply to a use right contrasted with a control right. They also suggest that women's claims to land are not justified solely through the recognition of their obligations in food production, but that local-level land-management forums make moral and material evaluations of inputs and behaviour between male and female household members over a very wide spectrum when adjudicating land claims.<sup>28</sup>

These more recent studies represent an important break with the interpretation of the difference in women's land claims from men's as necessarily implying their claims are weaker. Nevertheless, the key issue remains what happens to men's and women's historically constituted land interests with economic transformation, especially where land has become scarce as new economic uses for it have developed. Several studies show that with changing uses for land, particularly with new crops and forms of agriculture, contestations take place between men and women.<sup>29</sup> Although there are examples where women do maintain their land access in these contestations, the weight of evidence suggests that economic changes have resulted in women's diminished access to land. But what are the factors and processes at work?

One set of factors lying completely outside the issue of gendered land tenure is the distribution of economic resources required in order to work the land successfully in the context of present-day agriculture. Although they do farm much less land than men do, this is not usually because women are prevented from getting land, but because they lack working capital, inputs, extension access or credit.<sup>30</sup> This point is analogous to one made by Lastarria-Cornhiel (1997), who has examined the continent-wide evidence for the effects of land privatization and found that simple titling and land registration do not

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<sup>25</sup> For discussions of gender aspects of land interests see Jacobs 1991; Moore and Vaughan 1994; O'Rourke 1995; Fortmann et al. 1997; Rocheleau and Edmunds 1997; Schroeder 1997; Davison 1988b; Kevane and Gray 1999; Manuh et al. n.d.

<sup>26</sup> Cheater 1982; Moore and Vaughan 1994; Bosworth 1995; Yngstrom 1999, 2002.

<sup>27</sup> Lavigne Delville (2000) and Leonard and Toulmin (2000) point out that as both men and women acquire land through social relations, this is not an explanation for the respective strength of their claims.

<sup>28</sup> Bosworth 1995; Kevane and Gray 1999; Yngstrom 1999.

<sup>29</sup> Davison 1988b; Carney and Watts 1990; Moore and Vaughan 1994.

<sup>30</sup> See Whitehead 2001a for a more extended discussion of this point.



transform a customary tenure system into a freehold one; other changes in the commercialization of agriculture and the development of a land market are needed. She concludes that the general processes of privatization and concentration affect women's land and property rights negatively, rather than national land registration schemes per se. In the development of private property regimes of any kind, sub-Saharan African women tend to lose the rights they once had. This is because women suffer systematic disadvantages both in the market and in state-backed systems of property ownership, either because their opportunities to buy land are very limited, or because local-level authorities practise gender discrimination, preventing women from claiming rights that are in theory backed by law.<sup>31</sup> Women also encounter problems in both the statutory and customary systems for resolving land struggles and disputes—who does the adjudicating and how—or in wider aspects of gender relations. In Kenya, as new economic uses for land developed, men's and women's historically constructed claims to land use were always potentially in conflict and titling “provided a new institutional arena for existing struggles and debates to be played out” (Yngstrom 2002), but women could not translate resources for negotiating informal access into negotiating registered ownership. Carney (1988) and Carney and Watts (1990) have documented a particularly visible example of gender conflicts over land in the Gambia, where men relabelled as “household” land, farms that had once been women's “private” fields, thereby wresting control from women of rice lands for a new irrigation project. Here men use the language of custom to dominate a new economically rewarding form of agriculture. The remainder of this chapter examines this theme on a wider canvas, as we turn to modern uses of the language of custom in the field of land tenure policy making, in the gendered processes of claiming land and in the politics of state and society in Africa.

## **Policy Discourses**

Land tenure reform has become a significant area of policy making in many African states in the last 10 years and international organizations have been heavily involved. This section focuses on the policy discourses of three sets of significant agents: the World Bank, Oxfam Great Britain and the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), and African women lawyers.

### ***The World Bank 1970–2001***

The approach of the World Bank to the issue of land reform has not always been without ambiguities and (at least) potential contradictions. Nor has it remained constant. (Platteau 1992:7)

The World Bank's interpretation of macroeconomic processes and development, and its evaluations of the nature of African societies, states and economies, have been of profound importance in the last 20–25 years, in which African countries have become heavily aid-dependent and indebted, with the World Bank and the IMF particularly significant donors and creditors. Their strongly top-down analysis and policy prescriptions are allied with interventions of unparalleled range and depth. The World Bank, however,

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<sup>31</sup> These findings are important because many gender and development policy documents still advocate a blanket policy of ensuring women's land access through titling, without any reference to the specificities of the sub-Saharan African situation.

is a large and complex organization and, despite heavy orchestration to produce a strong orthodoxy in its analyses,<sup>32</sup> its many separate divisions have different kinds of policy focus and make a range of thematic arguments, no more so than with respect to land and gender issues, where the Bank's separate sections have very different levels of expertise.

### *The Land Policy Division and the evolution of its land tenure policy for Africa*

Changes in the World Bank's thinking between 1975 and 2001 about land reform are well documented by their own land and agriculture specialists. A number of papers have commented on the empirical bases for these changes and on the implications for approaches to productivity and growth in African agriculture.<sup>33</sup> The Land Policy Division (LPD) is the major unit charged with formulating land policy. From being centrally concerned with freeing land into individual ownership through the introduction of "modern" registered freehold titling, the LPD has moved against registered titling as the necessary precondition for agricultural investment and growth (World Bank 2001). Although still dominated by an orthodox modernizing position that land markets and individual tenure are essential if individuals are to be willing to invest in land in order to raise its productivity (cf. Quan 2000:34), the LPD's current thinking is influenced by recent evolutionary theories of land tenure that see privatization developing from below, in response to population pressure and commercialization (Platteau 1996). By the late 1980s, it had become ambivalent whether and when states should kick in to support these processes and increasingly developed a more positive view of the capacity of African customary systems of tenure to change in the "right" directions.

The landmark policy statement was a 1975 Land Reform Policy Paper from the LPD (World Bank 1975). Quan summarizes this as recommending "(i) formal land titling as a precondition of modern development, (ii) the abandonment of communal tenure systems in favour of freehold title and subdivision of the commons, (iii) widespread promotion of land markets to bring about efficiency-enhancing land transfers, and (iv) support for land redistribution on both efficiency and equity grounds" (Quan 2000:38). In addition to its concerns with equity and the highly political nature of land distribution, land reform had wider development implications because of its role in wealth creation and accumulation. Tenure reform was seen as central to promoting agricultural growth, with private freehold tenure an essential step to a modernized agriculture, promoting investments and providing incentives to adopt new technologies.

Platteau argues that land tenure reform in the World Bank was seen as primarily relevant to Latin America and Asia throughout the 1970s, on the widespread understanding that sub-Saharan Africa was a land-abundant continent characterized by extensive agriculture (Platteau 1992:5-6). All this changed in the 1980s, when the food crises and famines of different regions led to a renewed focus on agricultural productivity and the conditions for agricultural growth in Africa. This coincided with the adoption of highly interventionist structural adjustment lending and economic reform aimed at removing rigidities and promoting markets, and the 1980s saw a series of developing critiques of Africa as a land-abundant continent. As early as 1982, a highly authoritative report on agricultural development in sub-Saharan Africa pointed to land as a growing

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<sup>32</sup> See Whitehead and Lockwood 1999 for a description of this process with respect to the World Bank's poverty assessments.

<sup>33</sup> Deininger 1998; Deininger and Binswanger 1999; World Bank 2001.

constraint and recommended greater attention to land use and land tenure issues (Eicher and Baker 1982). An equally influential account emphasized the growth of land sales and the impediments afforded to a free market in land by post-colonial states. Feder and Noronha (1987) suggest that some post-colonial states were creating considerable problems of land access by continuing the colonial prohibitions on land sales and denying that land markets were growing. The informality of what was in reality a thriving land market, involving informal and disguised transactions all over Africa, led to distortions in the market, they argued. Continuing to prohibit land sales had allowed politically influential groups, such as chiefs and civil servants, to accumulate and become economically distinct from their subjects.

These developments are readily apparent in the 1989 report, *Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth* (World Bank 1989). It was manifestly concerned about growing land scarcity and rising population and with environmental and sustainability crises arising because land fertility was no longer sustained by long fallow periods.<sup>34</sup> It argued that increased agricultural productivity required new technologies and the incentives to adopt them, to be provided by tenure security through land titling. Land rights secured by titles would also help rural markets in credit and land to develop. Customary or local-level systems of resource allocation, in contrast, led to poor incentives, did not stimulate land and credit markets and hence prevented the distribution of land to the most efficient users.

This report, with its marriage of liberalization and neo-Malthusianism, was a high-level macropolicy document (cf. Williams 1994) and very influential, but the LPD itself had meanwhile become more concerned with the growing evidence that registered individual title had not brought the predicted economic benefits (Feder and Feeny 1991). In the early 1990s, new studies were undertaken or funded by the World Bank on the supposed link between the security of freehold tenure and improved agricultural productivity (Bruce and Migot-Adholla 1994). Among the countries studied was Kenya, and here the findings confirmed earlier research. No differences in the productivity and investment of lands held in freehold title compared with those held in customary tenure were found (Migot-Adholla et al. 1994b). Companion studies in other countries concluded that many farmers without formal title perceived that they had rights to continuous and unchallenged use of agricultural land (Migot-Adholla et al. 1994a). Customary tenure systems appeared to offer sufficient security of tenure for farmers to invest in land, although the lack of formal title meant they had no automatic rights of disposal (Bruce 1993). There seemed to be no compelling economic justification for replacing customary land law with state-guaranteed titles.

This important set of studies led Bruce et al. (1994) to re-evaluate customary systems and their capacity for change and flexibility and to downplay the role of state-backed formal systems of individual titling. They forecast: "a market economy will eventually produce a land tenure system that, while not identical, will bear a strong family resemblance to the Western concept of ownership" (Bruce et al. 1994:262). They therefore recommended incremental approaches to policy, adapting and not replacing existing land management practices, with the role of the state to provide the legal and administrative environment that will support and promote evolutionary change. The

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<sup>34</sup> In an extensive discussion, Williams (1994) argues that this report has many similarities with British colonial policies towards the end of the colonial period, especially the content and approach in the Swynnerton (1954) report and its implementation plans. See also Heyer and Williams (n.d.).

heavy financial costs of introducing and maintaining systems of registered title are further reasons cited for the policy sea-change.

In a 1999 presentation, Migot-Adholla summarized the World Bank's current position: the circumstances in which land titling is "an optimal solution" are "much more limited"; "communal" tenure systems can provide "a more cost-effective solution", "if transparency and local accountability can be assured" (Migot-Adholla 1999). The World Bank is now promoting reforms that will eliminate conflicts between parallel sets of rights and is setting up pilot programmes to register and adjudicate customary rights, to provide titles on a community basis and to redistribute land through negotiation and the market (Quan 2000). This consolidates the shift away from the 1975 document in the attitude toward customary systems of tenure. From being one of the greatest obstacles to agricultural modernization and enhanced productivity, in this new analysis they emerge as flexible and locally managed systems for guaranteeing secure land access on owner-occupied farms. The LPD has recently posted a 2001 policy statement on the Net that says quite unequivocally that there is now a consensus for the legal recognition of customary tenure and in favour of building on this (World Bank 2001).<sup>35</sup>

As statements about the policy approach taken to land tenure reform in particular African states, however, these documents from the LPD have to be treated with caution. The policy drivers in the constituent parts of the World Bank are by no means the same. The nuanced, self-critical and empirically foregrounded approaches of the Land Policy Division, with a new stress on the evolution of local-level practices, are not necessarily shared elsewhere. One competing set of discourses comes out of the Bank's divisions working on the environment and sustainability where there is a long-held view that communal forms of property ownership lead to overexploitation. Cleaver and others take a very strong line on the need for individual land rights to prevent land degradation (for example, Cleaver and Schreiber 1993). Many macroeconomists also support this position, although for rather different reasons. A free-market philosophy and an agenda of economic growth through further market liberalization, even when accompanied by poverty-reduction objectives, are responsible for the almost routine way in which reform to individual land titling appears in many country-level documents.<sup>36</sup> The World Bank continues to offer substantial support to governments establishing land tenure reform with individual registered titles.<sup>37</sup>

### *World Bank gender specialists*

The LPD identifies its new policy direction as positive for women, although the Internet responses point out the brief and ill-developed nature of the gender analysis in its recent draft policy document (Hanstat 2001; Quan 2001). Beyond the LPD, there are discernable and sharp differences among gender specialists. Within the Africa Division, for example, some gender specialists have put considerable work into looking for synergies between better outcomes for women, poverty reduction and overall economic

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<sup>35</sup> This statement is the equivalent of the 1975 LPD paper. It represents the outcome of the kinds of shifts and assessment of empirical evidence we have described in this section. However, it came out only when this chapter was in its very final stages and hence we do not consider it fully.

<sup>36</sup> For example, in its Country Assistance Strategies, which are largely written from a macroeconomic perspective (World Bank 2000c).

<sup>37</sup> See for example, World Bank 2000d, where it is stated that one of the components of phase 1 of the Land Administration Programme would be sub-pilot projects in systematic land titling and registration. The World Bank is financing US\$25 million of the US\$40 million estimated cost of the project.

growth (Blackden and Morris-Hughes 1993). Centred on the growth-efficiency model and taking a modernizing approach, the 1998 SPA (Special Program of Assistance for Africa) report stresses the need for top-down reform to give women better land rights and secure their access to land (Blackden and Bhanu 1999). In contrast, the Gender and Law Reform in Africa (GLRA) group within the Africa Division emphasizes that state reform involving titling and ownership has been negative for women and is much closer to the Land Policy Division in arguing that customary systems have some merit.

This group has been very active throughout the region, providing support for various networks of feminist lawyers and sponsoring in-country and cross-country studies, workshops and networks. It operates against a backdrop of the rights-based approaches, symbolized in Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, which have come to dominate international discourses on gender and development and in which legal reforms and statutory law are a major means for women to achieve rights denied them through custom and tradition. Much of the discussion in the conference proceedings on Gender Discrimination in Francophone sub-Saharan Africa, which was promoted and funded by GLRA, uses the language of rights to address discriminatory practices in customary systems. In contrast, publications authored by GLRA itself take a more positive approach to the customary and often criticize formal law as a means of achieving gender equity in Africa (World Bank 1994). Gopal suggests that reformed customary law has the potential to promote women's land and property issues, while acknowledging that land allocation is for the most part based on customary practices that deny women control over land (Gopal 1998). For them, these customary practices need to be understood as colonial constructs, and as not fixed. As socioeconomic conditions changed, the implementation of customary law as a fixed body of rules or practices, largely misunderstood by colonial regimes, has been very disadvantageous to women.

Elsewhere, Gopal criticizes colonial and post-colonial modernist legal reforms more elaborately (Gopal 1999). Legal reform "introduced personal laws that were based on a vision of personal relationships that bore little connection to the reality in these countries" (Gopal 1999:22) and simultaneously undermined existing systems of claims and dispute settlement, "leaving women in the unenviable position of being unprotected in either legal system". Drawing an important distinction between the premises underlying customary law and the forms of customary law and practice prevalent in African states today, they promote the idea of basing change on the reformed customary. She argues forcibly that women must participate in legal reform and that this participation will be strengthened when women get better access to the wider economy (Gopal 1999:22).

These differences between World Bank gender specialists in the late 1990s, which appear to reflect the degree of institutional commitment to growth and efficiency models and of appreciation of the potentials and pitfalls of legal reform and of the customary, are also apparent in some uneasiness about land issues in a recent important gender and development policy document (World Bank 2000b). This analysis owes a good deal to the newer poverty frameworks (for example, in the 2000/2001 *World Development Report*), which, while remaining committed to growth, now stress institutions and rights, emphasizing the role of the state in institutional reforms and the use of law to promote governance objectives (World Bank 2000a). In their analysis of gender and development issues and policy priorities, Mason and King give high priority to transforming the institutional environment and place a welcome stress on social relations (World Bank 2000b).

Although the comments in Mason and King on women and land are very brief, the phrase “land rights” occurs in several places, but the pro-customary stance is also there: “In places, such as SSA, where systems of customary law operate side-by-side with statutory law, special care is needed in the use of statutory changes...efforts to improve women’s land rights in Ghana succeeded because the new incentives under statutory law were consistent with custom” (World Bank 2000b:15). All signalling, perhaps, that issues about the respective merits of the customary and statutory for women’s land access remain unresolved.

***Independent land policy advocates: Oxfam GB and the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED)***

The last 20 years have seen a substantial expansion in NGO and other activity in Africa, with the development of a wide range of national and regional African NGOs and European-based organizations also expanding their Africa programmes. Oxfam GB and IIED are two European organizations that have been particularly active with respect to land policy. Both organizations have a position on land tenure reform that is very different in its starting point and objectives from that of the World Bank. A strong hostility to orthodox economic positions and the promotion of registered individually owned freehold land titles is part of their much wider critique of the World Bank’s policies throughout the 1980s and 1990s. These organizations have long advocated building on local-level land management, suggesting potential convergence with the new stance by the World Bank’s LPD.

***Oxfam Great Britain***

Oxfam GB runs a specific website on land policy issues<sup>38</sup> and their concern with land issues arises from their commitment to reducing poverty and working for sustainable livelihoods. Oxfam GB’s main analysis is of the political processes at play, where it foregrounds the role of international interests in national policy and identifies recent processes common to several African states. National governments set in train land tenure reform “generally designed to open the door to privatization and greater foreign ownership of land” after consultations that are usually very narrow (Palmer 1998:2).<sup>39</sup> It also pays attention to the interests of the state in maintaining control over land allocation, and the power and patronage that is built on land relationships: “Politicians may tolerate bottom-up participatory processes in other areas, but not in matters which require them to relinquish control (directly or indirectly) over land allocation” (Adams personal communication, cited in Palmer 2000:288). “In brief, access to land by the poor in many parts of Africa is currently seriously threatened by a combination of privatization and unrestricted market forces; by governments desperately seeking foreign investments including for tourism; and by greed and corruption by the rich and powerful” (Palmer 1998:1).

Oxfam GB has been heavily involved in supporting NGOs and coalitions in Eastern and Southern Africa for the last 10 years; in particular, those NGOs, coalitions

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<sup>38</sup> <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/landrights>. This site has details of the relatively large number of publications and conference papers on land tenure issues in Africa that have come out since this paper was written.

<sup>39</sup> Palmer cites Tanzania as an exception.

and land alliances<sup>40</sup> seeking local-level management of land allocation and dispute settlement in order to promote better access to land for ordinary people. Recent documents from Oxfam GB take many cues from Alden Wily, who emphasizes, first, the persistence of customary modes of landholding and dispute settlement, despite the considerable efforts of governments to diminish them and, second, the state's capacity throughout recent reform processes to preserve the link between land relations, power and patronage and its own absolute land ownership (Alden Wily 2000, forthcoming, cited in Palmer 2000). On the basis of a review of over 60 land laws in Eastern and Southern Africa, she asserts that "the most radical shift in tenure reform occurring in sub-Saharan Africa is that for the first time in 100 years states are being forced to recognize African tenure regimes as legal in their own right and equivalent in the eyes of national law to the freehold leasehold culture" (Alden Wily forthcoming, cited in Palmer 2000:271). The persistence of customary modes of landholding and dispute settlement is tantamount to a form of resistance to the state. In her arguments, two important strands are evident. First, there is the idea that statutory procedures can be improved by incorporating some of the principles of customary landholding systems. The recognition of the customary brings into play new ideas of property and of ownership. Common property can be recognized and new forms of process confirming land ownership—such as verbal contracts—become recognized. Second, there is a firm belief in the ability of local communities to manage their own affairs and in the importance in general of letting them do so. The key is community control, when "the point at which acquisition and disposal of land rights are officially endorsed and regulated is moving closer to the landholder" (Alden Wily forthcoming, cited in Palmer 2000:271). She sees the new institutions proposed, or required, for land tenure reform as part of a broader process of democratization and building local-level political and decision-making capacity (Alden Wily 2000).

This approach fits in well with Oxfam GB's general support for encouraging participation and building of local capacities. Palmer diagnoses subsidiarity and local devolution as the key objectives in current land reform policy "meaning that decisions on land management and control should be taken at the lowest levels possible" (Palmer 2000:24). He identifies a trend "towards formal tribunals, independent tribunals with recourse to the ordinary courts, operating at the local level and in some cases operated by community members" (Palmer 2000:24) and criticizes the role of prominent land lawyers because they adopt centrist top-down solutions. Little of the discussion in Oxfam GB-authored publications examines in detail how the proposed local-level systems might work, including whether the values and processes of customary systems can deliver more equitable land access. There are many warnings that the local level is also the site of power relations. For example, Palmer discusses the danger that NGOs may be inadequate vehicles for equitable land policy, not only because they are sometimes short-lived and often dependent on outside funding, but also because class, ethnicity and other social divisions may be reflected in their memberships. Here we are beginning to see an

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<sup>40</sup> Details of current land alliances and networks in Eastern and Southern Africa are to be found on LandWeb, hosted by MWENGO at [www.mwengo.org](http://www.mwengo.org). MWENGO is a reflection and development centre for NGOs in Eastern and Southern Africa. The organization is based in Harare; the Secretariat has been operating since late 1993. The LandWeb is part of a broader project whose main goal is to strengthen the impact of land advocacy by NGOs in Eastern and Southern Africa. "[This] project was launched in 1999. It was designed in response to the increasing interventions in the area of land by NGOs in most countries of the region" (from [www.mwengo.org](http://www.mwengo.org)) [Editors' note: The website is no longer valid.]

incipient tension between the customary as the site of resistance to the state, and hence an important discourse around which greater local-level political capacities can be built, and the customary as the site of unequal rural social relations.

*International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED):  
The 1999 DFID conference*

IIED is a UK-based organization undertaking research and lobbying on global environmental and sustainability issues. With a particular emphasis on working with partner organizations and promoting networking, it has also been at the forefront of promoting participatory approaches and is a major resource centre for these. Its main impetus to land work in sub-Saharan Africa comes from its concerns with environmental sustainability, with the growing exclusion of some rural people from the natural resource base and with the proliferating conflicts between different kinds of land users, especially between pastoralists and arable farmers. It has a specific interest in problems of conflict between different land users, especially those with secondary rights (such as pastoralists), in common property resources and how to protect the land claims of small rural producers that are essential to sustainability and to poverty alleviation.

IIED is an organization with major experience and expertise in land policy issues in Africa, and it is not possible to review all its work here.<sup>41</sup> In 1998, it was recruited by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) to work with the Natural Resources Institute in the United Kingdom to organize a conference on land tenure issues in Africa (DFID 1999). DFID has played a major role in land tenure reforms in Eastern and Southern Africa and continues to work extensively with African governments on land policy. The conference brought together many of the main specialists on African land tenure, including African and international legal experts, representatives from international donors and from national and international NGOs and a large number of country experts from a wide spread of Africa's nations. Its papers have been edited into one of the most up-to-date assessments on current land tenure policy issues in Africa (Toulmin and Quan 2000a).

In their introduction, Toulmin (IIED) and Quan (NRI) distance themselves from the approach taken historically by the World Bank, arguing for a strongly human-centred approach, less driven by economic prescription (Toulmin and Quan 2000b). They rehearse the arguments about the limitations of legislation, reform and registration, paying special attention to the failure to capture secondary rights, to inequitable outcomes and to the conflict and difficulties of resolution within dispute settlement procedures, points pursued in a number of the other chapters in the book (for example, Platteau 2000; Lavigne Delville 2000). The alternative is land tenure reform based on the practices and institutions of customary law, modified so that they reflect the social and political realities of contemporary rural circumstances. They are against universal solutions and think that the actual forms of reform should differ in different countries. "A new paradigm is emerging that does not prescribe a specific approach to land reform, based on pluralism and the need for Africans themselves to negotiate their own solutions" (Toulmin and Quan 2000a:6). Their introduction not only discusses the merits and demerits of customary versus state law, but also steers the discussion in the direction

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<sup>41</sup> Relevant publications include IIED 1999; Toulmin and Pepper 2000; and Toulmin et al. 2001.



of how to resolve the problems of land tenure within a modified customary law framework and what kind of institutional innovations might be needed to do so.

Their justifications for basing reform on customary law are several. Customary law is able to provide relative security to community members at lower cost than state-run structures, is flexible in that it allows different forms of access, and is more equitable in that it considers the needs of the poor (Toulmin and Quan 2000a:12). They refer to Sjaastad and Bromley (1997), who argue that customary law, which is neither communal nor ambiguous, is flexible and responding to increasing land scarcity and permitting individualization. Customary law has the merits of being embedded within local social relations and values and could be administered in recognized forms that would meet rural people's need for their own security, best guaranteed in the modern world by community social networks and "the weight of an official stamp" (Toulmin and Quan 2000a:13). Basing reform on customary law also fits with new global thinking about the need for local people to participate in the management of natural resources and with renewed interest in decentralization. Toulmin and Quan argue that in circumstances where land registration is needed, it should proceed with more respect for customary law; it could be simpler, cheaper and more equitable to register collective rights as opposed to individual rights.

The role given to the state in this new customary law-based framework is relatively limited: to pass enabling legislation, redistribute land if need be and establish the authority of the institutions tasked with managing land. Even so, a modified customary system is not an easy option. It is expensive and long term. It needs additional measures such as education, support such as credit, extension, inputs, access to land, and so on. Moreover legal changes to make laws consistent with land law are needed. Their bottom-up approach leads them to be relatively non-prescriptive about the new institutions required to run these modified customary land tenure systems. They should focus on dispute resolution but it is very important which institutions are granted the powers to make land decisions. Different implications follow from whether it is the chiefs or an elected local body (for example, district assembly) that is selected. "Authority in land whether vested in the chiefs, or in the government officials and political leaders, can in turn lead directly to private economic benefits for these actors, derived from land accumulation, patronage and land transactions" (Toulmin and Quan 2000b:6).

Chapters in the book (Toulmin and Quan 2000b) document a number of different experiences of registering customary rights, which have not always ensured protection for the claims of different stakeholders, in particular the poor. The book contains a chapter giving an overview of women's access to land (Hilhorst 2000) and several papers on gender issues were presented at the conference on land tenure issues in Africa but without any real attempt being made to subject the policy proposals to a gendered view, despite women being one of the stakeholder categories that have demonstrably lost out in the historical development of land tenure reforms. Later work from IIED on women and land tenure reform does begin to explore some of the nuances of customary systems for women (Leonard and Toulmin 2000). Leonard and Toulmin argue that women's land access under customary systems is very diverse and that "in practice, women do not perceive their rights to land as insecure, as long as their household and community relations remain stable" (Leonard and Toulmin 2000:4). Women's disadvantages often occurred at divorce or widowhood or because they lacked power in social negotiations. An important theme developed in this account is the issue of women's lack of voice in

rural decision making. Citing Odgaard (personal communication) with respect to Tanzania<sup>42</sup> they highlight the enormous difficulties women face in seeking to use the law to claim their rights and identify women's lack of direct participation in village assemblies and similar local institutions as a major stumbling block to greater equity in local resource allocation (Leonard and Toulmin 2000:14-15). They recommend the strengthening of women's representation in central and local government as integrally linked to more gender equity in land issues.

Both IIED and Oxfam GB, then, emphasize the ways in which recent national land policy has led to important tracts of local resources being alienated by international companies and the close link between national and local politics and landholding. They respond by exploring new forms of ownership supported by local management, devolution, subsidiarity and democratization. In important elements, this response converges with that of the World Bank, especially in the role that the "modified customary" should play in local-level land management, despite approaching the issue from different positions. For the World Bank, the policy is to encourage these to evolve; for the independent land policy advocates, more democratically accountable management systems are to be introduced to build on what already exists locally. While recognizing that they are constructed, each organization persists in using the term "customary" to refer to these local-level systems. In no case are the gender implications of these proposals addressed adequately. However, it may be women particularly who have a great deal to lose from the turn to "the customary" as a solution to the problems in centralized state-led legal reforms of land tenure. The main constituency that has addressed these issues are Africa's feminist lawyers and it is to these we now turn.

### ***African feminist legal discourses***

African and Africanist feminist lawyers have long been concerned with drawing attention to women's rights issues within the legal system as a whole and within different areas of law. Early path-breaking studies<sup>43</sup> have been deepened by more specific studies of areas such as family law, inheritance, land relations and more recently violence against women.<sup>44</sup> Since the late 1980s and 1990s, in the context of the series of UN conferences, women lawyers have become more influential in policy advocacy and demands for legal reform. During this period, their regional and subregional groupings have grown in strength, and they have been increasingly engaged in advocating law reforms and the implementation of UN conference outcomes, popularizing laws relevant to women's rights, and promoting legal literacy and paralegal training for women (Manuh 1995). In the fight for gender equality, activist feminist lawyers are oriented toward the international conventions and instruments and a rights perspective and have a generally positive stance toward the role of the state and statutory law to deliver rights to women (Butegwa 1994; Cook 1994).

In their approaches to women and land, the most common view is that legally backed land ownership is critical to rural women's production and economic efficiency.<sup>45</sup> While some prominent African male lawyers—for example, Okoth-Ogendo

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<sup>42</sup> See also Wanitzek 1990; Lawi 2000.

<sup>43</sup> Hay and Wright 1982; Manuh 1984; see also Armstrong 1987; Armstrong and Stewart 1990.

<sup>44</sup> Molokomme 1991, 1995, 1996; Cook 1991; the WLSA series: Aphane et al. 1998; Chuulu et al. 1997; Kidd et al. 1997; Letuka et al. 1998; Ncube 1997a, 1997b; Temba et al. 1997.

<sup>45</sup> A major exception here is Himonga and Munachonga 1991.

(1989) and more recently Shivji (1998)—have been at the forefront of the reappraisal of the ability of customary law to deliver security of land tenure, with very few exceptions (for example, Manuh 1994), female lawyers concerned with women's issues have looked to statutory law to address questions of security for women. They have mainly explored the ways in which customary law rules currently do not favour women, and generally argued that both laws and practice discriminate against women. It is important to understand their critiques of contemporary African legal systems and the treatment of women by both customary and statutory systems as a basis for this gender difference in approaches to land tenure policy reform.

One consensus is that legal pluralism has been inimical to women's claims to land. Knowles, for example, argues that it allows male-dominated society to resist women's claims by vacillating between the two systems and successfully postponing or neutralizing any reforms that might have been instituted (Knowles 1991:8). Butegwa also writes that in legally pluralistic states, case law has tended to affirm customary law practices even when they are discriminatory (Butegwa 1991). Another argument has been that the imposition of Western notions of ownership in land relations in Africa had led to much confusion about the character of land tenure—to women's disadvantage (Karanja 1991). Some writers contrast women's social embeddedness in the pre-colonial period with the processes of individualization that accompanied colonial economic and legal change, arguing that the inferiority of their inheritance rights under customary law and practice had less import than it does now. Karanja, for example, argues that in spite of having no inheritance rights, "women held positions of structural significance, serving as the medium through which individual rights passed to their sons. They enjoyed security of tenure rooted in their structural role as lineage wives" (Karanja 1991:116). Knowles agrees:

In theory, customary systems of land tenure and use traditionally provided some recourse for women in need of land for food production. Evidence suggests that this theoretical refuge ran along a continuum from a right to beg for a piece of land from a male relative or acquaintance, to a system where women's rights to land from their native lineages were strong enough to attract them away from their marital residences in patrilocal societies, for the purpose of continuing to cultivate land provided by their natal families. (Knowles 1991:5)

These positions share McAuslan's analysis of the way African interests in land were extinguished by the colonial state with the support of its judiciary. Safeguards that existed in customary law have been eroded (McAuslan 2000).

The content of customary law, in which women's rights in land are described as derived and secondary and depending on their relations with various men—fathers, brothers, husbands and sons—has also been criticized for playing a part in the erosion of women's interests in land. Either they have no inheritance rights or their inheritance rights are inferior to men's, with some authors pointing out that women themselves might be inherited when their husbands die (Butegwa 1991; Karanja 1991). "The whittling away of women's land rights by the changes instituted by these subsequent regimes was a direct result of their disabilities arising from the customary rules of inheritance and the customary division of labour which had resulted in women not being able to acquire land for themselves" (Karanja 1991:117). Knowles agrees, arguing that as economic and political changes unfold "at best, women are forced onto the least desirable and productive land and, at worst, their limited rights may be extinguished altogether" (Knowles 1991:5). She goes on to critique positive attitudes to customary law, arguing that "many African governments are choosing to make changes at the margin, leaving

untouched the customary laws' prohibitions against formal land allocation to women" (Knowles 1991:11).

Even so, in the writings of African legal feminists, there is clearly some ambivalence to the state and to statutory law. At one end of the spectrum is the view that statutory laws themselves have discriminated against women. Relevant here is the widespread understanding that women's land rights were severely eroded by titling and individualization backed by statutory law in Kenya. "The process of land reform solidified the role of men as the inextricable link between women and the land and further hardened their land rights into absolute ownership to the exclusion of women" (Karanja 1991:122). The other position is that, while a law may be progressive in its provisions, it is enforcement that is the problem. Butegwa, for example, argues that where statutory law is on the face of it favourable, it is not enforced because of women's lack of awareness and power, resistance from male relations, the fear of sanctions and the lack of political will on the part of government (Butegwa 1991:57). Furthermore, even where statutory law does in principle govern land relations, customary practices continue to be very important in the determination of land rights. Women's security of tenure thus continues to be threatened by discriminatory customary practices of inheritance, lack of adequate protective legislation and the failure to observe governmental and legal measures intended for the protection of women's land rights. Butegwa calls this the "inherent limit of law as an instrument for social change" (Butegwa 1991:55).

In spite of these reservations of feminist lawyers about statutory law, reforming the law is generally seen as offering a better possibility for securing women's rights in land than simply allowing customary law to evolve. Butegwa still prefers statutory law to customary law, arguing that, in the latter, both law and practice are not favourable (Butegwa 1991:54). Within this broad position, some emphasize changing laws, some emphasize legal training for better implementation, and disagreement exists about which areas of law should be reformed. Karanja (1991), for example, recommends land redistribution, land ceilings, titling and registration. Knowles does not share this positive attitude to titling and registration: she argues that high levels of security can exist without legal title and vice versa. She also notes that titling programmes are male-biased in assuming a nuclear family and a male household head and being generally hostile to secondary interests (Knowles 1991:11). Butegwa (1991) supports law reform, but argues for an emphasis on inheritance law: "Where the acquisition of land is mainly through inheritance, giving a woman a contractual capacity and the right to deal in land is irrelevant if she cannot inherit it in the first place" (Butegwa 1991:57). In contrast, Himonga and Munachonga (1991) stress that it is not women's legal access to land that is the main problem with respect to poverty and their agricultural income, but other structural disabilities. To improve a variety of access problems, they recommend the education of officials and women, special loan facilities for women, more appropriate technologies and the recruitment and placement of more female extension workers (Himonga and Munachonga 1991:70-71). Butegwa's recommendations also include legal rights education for both men and women, especially men in the local power structures, such as chiefs and dispute-settlement personnel, together with community-level support groups to dissolve male resistance and help women overcome their fears.

Feminist lawyers also differ in the extent to which they recognize that there may be enormous resistance to equitable practices and the fact that it is broader gender inequalities that are at issue. Karanja argues that the poor record of statutory law in promoting gender equity is due to discriminatory law, ignorance of the law, the interplay

of customary and statutory law and inequalities in marital relationships that can be addressed by effecting legislation (Karanja 1991:131–132). For Knowles, male resistance is a key issue, and law reform must go beyond land rights and tackle broader gender inequalities in society (Knowles 1991:12–13). Butegwa highlights male resistance in the judiciary and courts where many judges prefer “to dress personal prejudices and lack of appreciation of the issues in ancient judicial precedents” (Butegwa 1991:57).

Although both Karanja and Butegwa recognize the difference between formal and substantive rights in their work, the assumption is that women have been unable to enforce their rights out of ignorance, thus downplaying the strength of factors such as inequalities in social relations and institutional and cultural biases, which prevent women from succeeding in making claims and sustaining them. An examination of these issues requires a broader framework of analysis. Recent literature available at the national level, in which the doubtful value of the Western jurisprudential framework and the oversimplified approach to legal pluralism are raised, shows signs of the development of such a framework. Karanja (1991) critiques Western notions of ownership and access and the characterization of customary law in the literature, noting that a woman's bundle of rights over land typically does not include any of the hallmarks of Western notions of ownership, that is, the ability to loan, rent, sell, dispose of by will or make permanent improvements. Both Manuh and Manji are at pains to argue that, correctly understood, legal pluralism does not consist of a dichotomy between customary law and statutory law, nor does it imply a hierarchy of norms dominated by statutory law (Manuh 1994; Manji 1998). The latter, moreover, is an invention every bit as much as customary law, in that it also embodies ideological assumptions rooted in the contexts of the colonial reformers (Manuh 1994).

These reflections have begun to dismantle the modernizing discourses that have hitherto dominated the perspectives of legal feminists and by implication these very same discourses are one source of the considerable problems that the formal legal system poses for women. They have not yet, however, led to clear policy recommendations. Manuh has supported Chanock's idea of alternative institutions outside law and state, but her recommendations are very preliminary (Manuh 1994:224). By and large, the sustained faith in formal law leads many feminist lawyers to underestimate the dynamic power relations that underlie inequity in land relations, which ultimately limits the effectiveness of campaigns for women's legal literacy. No doubt some women have been empowered to struggle for their rights because of a growing awareness of legal machinery and of what laws have been passed, but this is not in itself an answer to rural male resistance or to male resistance within legal institutions. However broad or narrow, law reform has to rely on male-dominated institutions to be passed and implemented.

## **Achieving Gender Justice in Women's Access to Land**

### ***The (Re-)Turn to the customary***

Recent policy discussions reject land tenure reform based on making a complete rupture with customary systems and instead stress building on them. The World Bank wants a flexible system of access, guaranteeing smallholders' security and incentives to invest and now thinks that letting the customary evolve will deliver land markets and efficient land allocation in a cost-effective and trouble-free manner. Most of the writers within the

Bank's revised thinking say very little about the anticipated effects on women's land access. Paying scant attention to the processes by which evolutionary change is occurring, they underplay issues of equity in the outcome. Customary land law is seen as moving steadily, even if in a chaotic and problematic way, toward individualized tenure and land markets under its own steam. Oxfam and IIED argue for subsidiarity and the development of local-level management systems for legally backed customary land tenure practices. Many who hold land under informal systems have no way of claiming ownership under statutory law, so it is an important first step to recognize and register these entitlements. They have more concern for secondary users and with the implications of rural power relations, pointing out the link between the economic gains to traditional leaders and systems that support the idea of traditional authority. Nevertheless, they still use the terminology of the "customary". African feminist lawyers hold a range of views, although for many of them it is state-backed legal systems that are the key to establishing better access to resources for women. There is recognition that, in practice, formal legal systems have often worked to women's disadvantage, but the way forward is to make the formal system work better. The most prevalent view is that customary systems enshrine male domination, although some recent commentators are more positive toward customary law, showing how it has worked to women's advantage.

A turn, or re-turn, to the customary acutely raises the question of what we know about how customary processes actually work. Such a question is an essential forerunner to the critical issue of the potential of so-called customary systems to deliver gender justice with respect to land, especially as changing demands have exposed new ways in which normative principles may be in conflict, bringing individuals into disputes that are difficult to resolve. Although everyone seems to agree that the customary is historically constructed in form and content, that it is flexible and embedded in local social relations, and that conflicting claims are negotiated on the basis of a series of principles and not on a series of rules, it is hard not to agree with Okoth-Ogendo that we know very little about customary land tenure institutions within the modern nation state (Okoth-Ogendo 2000). We now turn to look at a small number of recent studies that have investigated the actual ways in which land claims have been made, managed and adjudicated in African rural localities. These show that the customary cannot be considered in isolation and that its links and interactions with other arenas in Africa's pluralistic legal systems are critical for women's land claims. Re-examining the debates among African feminist lawyers (and some of their international interlocutors), we pose a series of significant questions. What weight does one give to the fact that women and other disadvantaged social groups are able to seize opportunities within systems that discriminate against them to press their claims in deciding whether to change the system or retain it? Does the recognition that statutory interventions, such as titling and registration, may have the effect of rigidifying customary practices and extinguishing some rights under customary law invalidate statutory interventions as a way of proceeding? How different is the recommendation to modify customary systems from the simple "trust customary law" positions of some mainstream African land specialists? Is this a call to do nothing about the glaring inequalities in land relations? To comment on these questions we need to revisit many themes and issues raised in previous sections, but this time more firmly from a gender perspective.

### ***Legal pluralism and the customary reconsidered***

Recent local-level studies, especially those undertaken by gender specialists and feminists, have shown that the empirical relation between statutory and customary law is very far

from the legal centrist model identified previously. Stewart (1996), for example, argues that the systems are not separate in that, even as they have different bases of legitimacy, they operate in more interconnected ways than is realized. In practice, people, including women, sustain their claims to resources by employing arguments from both the statutory and so-called customary law. For Stewart, legal pluralism is the consciously constructed dichotomy between statutory and customary. She sees this dichotomy as closely connected to other such dichotomies as male/female, urban/rural, market/personal activity, public/private and modern/traditional employed by powerful people to oppress those with less power. Griffiths, a feminist lawyer writing about local forms of settlement of marriage disputes in a Bakwena village in Botswana, argues that the concepts and objectives from one system seem to slip quite easily to the other and that actors, including law enforcement officers, do not treat the legal ideas in the two systems as hermetically sealed off (Griffiths 1998, 2001). A more appropriate model of legal pluralism would see them as mutually constitutive.

More generally, recent literature describes as “forum shopping” situations where individuals are using different courts and other dispute-settlement forums and deploying arguments grounded in either “customary” or “modernist” principles, whichever is to their advantage. This conveys a more messy reality in which there are no very rigid boundaries between the plurality of legal forums where different principles of legitimacy and of the basis for claims are brought into play. Recent work in the anthropology of law refers rather to plural legal orders, taking up the term *sociolegal* to convey both Woodman’s idea of sociologists’ customary law and to express the ways in which both social and legal are in play in many different legal orders (Wilson 2000). The mingling of social and legal is particularly well brought out by Bosworth, who refers to south Kigezi, in Uganda, as having a pluralistic legal order (Bosworth 1995). Adapting her account somewhat, there seem to be at least three sociolegal orders in south Kigezi. At the local level there are many informal means of dispute settlement including kinship mechanisms that primarily use social norms, practices and processes. The formal legal system does not recognize these as legal. This kind of sociolegal order is very important in land claims throughout rural Africa, which leads Okoth-Ogendo, and others, to argue that most adjudication decisions about land operate outside the law.<sup>46</sup> In the Uganda case, not all land claims are through women’s husbands. They can also be made through other kin relations, and Bosworth argues that their derived rights were historically very strong claims. However, as lineage members, women had experienced increasing tenure insecurity as senior male lineage members had begun to exercise greater authority over the disposition of lineage lands. This study concurs with many others suggesting that historical transformations have exposed the weaknesses of the customary for ensuring the land access of women as lineage members in situations of land pressure or livelihood insecurity.

Bosworth’s second sociolegal order is the formal local-level courts or arbitration forums, whose jurisdiction and scope is determined by the state. These include the Resistance Council courts<sup>47</sup> and the various levels of magistrate’s court, and she analyses a series of land-relevant cases brought before them. The court reports give some access to the practices, norms, ideas of evidence, social valuations and so on within this legal arena, and Bosworth stresses that a wide range of social factors are taken into account. Concepts

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<sup>46</sup> This point is also made about francophone Africa by Lavigne Delville (2000), who stresses the permanent illegality and insecurity of rural people.

<sup>47</sup> See Odanga-Mwaka 1998 for an empirical study of Resistance Council courts in Masaka, Uganda.

from statutory systems, such as freehold titles, are also in play, but they are only one of a range of resources and only one model of the links between persons that disputants and legal actors call upon. Bosworth gives examples of women in Kabale who have pushed their claims well beyond what is “customary”. She cites two cases where women had succeeded in getting their names put onto joint titles on land plots with their husbands and had their claims recognized at the local level. In both cases, the women were more educated than the majority of rural women and their husbands were active in the Resistance Councils. A wide range of other persons within a community are involved in dispute settlements—either as witnesses or as indirect principals. As well as recognizing legal claims to ownership backed by title, women’s successful land claims are often based on the fulfilment of social obligations to a range of kin or family members and over long periods of time. The third sociolegal order, not physically present in south Kigezi, but theoretically open to people living there, is the higher formal courts that operate elsewhere in Uganda. These follow statutory law, but may have recourse to a legally constructed notion of customary law, which is far from the actual practices of Kiga people (Bosworth 1995).

The south Kigezi material throws light on the arguments about the gendered “bundle of rights”, referred to earlier. It does not seem to be the case that we can generalize that men’s interests are primary and women’s secondary, although the kinds of interests men and women held were different and these differences form the basis for inequalities, at least in the second half of the twentieth century, if not before. The extent to which women’s and men’s interests differ and how they differ is very context-specific and cannot be prejudged. Most policy advocates are generalizing on the basis of one particular set of patrilineal practices in their accounts of the secondary nature of women’s land claims. Yngstrom, in her study of a land-scarce area in Dodoma, Tanzania, which also has a patrilineal kinship system, shows that, in the face of diminishing claims on lineage land, women’s main access to land is now through their husbands, and argues that women’s claims are not derived or secondary and that this formulation follows a Western legal idea of a hierarchy of rights inappropriate in the African context (Yngstrom 1999). Women did not always fail in land disputes, with significant factors affecting the outcome being the husband’s ability to demonstrate land shortage and the wife’s ability to draw on her own lineage men for support. Yngstrom’s study encourages a view that variation in the content and strength of women’s claims within local-level practices and ideologies more widely in sub-Saharan Africa will markedly affect the potential for these modified local-level systems to deliver gender justice.

In our view, these detailed studies demonstrate that more important than the content of the set of interests, are the processes by which interests and claims are made and secured. The flexibility to respond to new circumstances comes about as individual men and women—young and old, farmer and pastoralist, migrant and autochthon—negotiate over specific parcels of land and over specific kinds of use claim. The factors affecting these struggles and disputes are highly context-specific. The rhetorical recourse by all sides to the contents of long-held practices may or may not be important. The content and direction of the arguments that women make are also highly context-specific, although one recurring powerful set of arguments seems to be that the performance of their social obligations, including those to their husbands but also to other relatives,



builds up claims.<sup>48</sup> A very important limitation on customary systems delivering gender justice lies in these decision-making processes and negotiations and their intersection with rural power relations. Land claims are socially embedded not only in the sense that the network of social relations gives rise to interlinked claims and obligations, but also in the sense that the processes of allocation and adjudication are themselves socially embedded. In part, this is the lesson from Mackenzie's study of a Kikuyu area in Kenya, where in one sense it was not the statutory that was the problem. Titling could go to women as wives, widows and daughters, but it did not, because local practices and interests intervened (Mackenzie 1993). Mackenzie suggests that this was not so much because individual men were acting out of economic self-interest, but more because of concerted efforts by male members of the patrilineage to protect the local, kin-based social order. Arguably, however, without the necessity, required by the land reform, to recognize a single claim against land as being ownership, perhaps the customary would have muddled along, with women still able to make their weaker claims. However, once registered titles become an issue, local social relations emerge more clearly as sites of gender power—albeit not ones in which women are simply passive victims, unable to negotiate, bargain and contest sometimes successfully.

The Uganda (south Kigezi) case study also suggests that letting local-level systems just muddle along will not protect women's land claims as economic change unfolds. Here, women's claims on the land of the patrilineage they had married into were quite strong—for example, one wife was successful in getting the court to overrule her husband selling land given to him by his lineage, which he was required to pass on to her to farm (Bosworth 1995). Even so, they had largely been unable to translate these claims into effective ownership in the land market and husbands had severely curtailed their access to cash income. Three women who had purchased land had done so in their husbands' names with potentially significant implications for its disposal without their consent later on.

These studies, then, tend to confirm the critical perspective adopted by some African feminist lawyers with respect to customary practices, whose starting point was that the "customary"—considered as institutions, as social relations and as discourses—are sites where, on the whole, men have more power than women. Rural African societies are, of course, and were very varied, particularly in the extent of economic and political inequality. Even the most egalitarian societies have been shown to contain significant relations of inequality based in gender and generation. In the past, as today, norms were not universally held, but contested, especially by those whose needs were not met and who lacked voice in decision making. In those historical periods and regions where there was an abundance of land and where its tenure was not such an issue, the absence of women's voices may not have affected their access to land. But it is precisely the inequalities in power relations in rural societies, played out in a modern context, that are the mechanism by which women lose claims to land as individualized proprietorship evolves. The flexibility and capacity to change, which are still characteristic of some local-level systems, mean that local-level practices are the outcomes of negotiations, but they are negotiations between people with very different quotients of economic and political power. "In any discussion about land, various interested parties will push claims and interpretations. The ability to make these claims or interpretations stick is a function of local structures of power, influence and personality" (Moore and Vaughan 1994:211). This implies that the rural customary cannot

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<sup>48</sup> This point is also made in Kevane and Gray 1999.

be left to muddle along without widening the gap between men's and women's land access. It is necessary self-consciously to manage change to produce greater gender justice with respect to resource allocation for rural women. The next section reconsiders the role of the state as a major actor in promoting change.

***Managing change in a gender-equitable manner:  
The role of the state, the limitations of the law***

Some of the feminist lawyers reviewed earlier brought out some very critical limitations in the use of law to produce gender equity. In the first place, there is a problem of access. Time and again, the point has been made about women's distance from legal processes and their inability to access the courts. This is underlined by how celebrated the cases of the few women who do go to the courts become. While Wambui Otieno and Unity Dow are "household" names within international and African feminist circles, and are referred to over and over again by academics commenting on women and the law in Africa, it is important to keep in mind their minority status. The work that has gone into promoting legal literacy is important, as is that to strengthen women's access to forums and bodies of law they are more familiar with. But even local-level formal legal forums may have relatively little legitimacy in rural areas, and in many areas women report that they need ways of resolving disputes that are accepted by male relatives and members of the community (Leonard and Toulmin 2000; Odgaard 2000). In arguing for the progressive role of law, then, feminist lawyers need to be more sensitive to the different arenas of struggles for rights and the varied array of forces called forth.

A second set of limitations is that formal legal cultures and institutions are not themselves women-friendly, despite their supposed impartiality and neutrality. Studies of the ways in which statutory law operates in African states—especially those that use case law and records of hearings and case outcomes as their main empirical evidence—have shown very mixed outcomes for women. Worldwide, women and feminist lawyers have exposed gender bias in legal cultures and the law, criticizing not just lawmakers and legal practitioners, but many legal concepts. One of the paradoxical features of Africa's legal cultures and law is that, some of the gender bias in formal law arises precisely from the construction of "lawyers' customary law". In many contemporary African states, lawyers' customary law remains a highly important statutorily defined domain existing alongside the actual norms, practices and processes in rural communities. When it was created in the colonial era it was precisely many aspects of "family law"—issues relating to marriage, divorce, children's affiliation and the devolution of property—that were devolved to it. It is these areas of family law that enshrine gender-discriminatory practices in contemporary states. Further bias arises from the ways in which discourses of custom are used within legal cultures and legal institutions. Stewart, especially, has argued that women's claims under modern legal systems in African states are undermined when men argue that their positions are contrary to "custom". The language of custom, as she points out, is being used politically in national-level discourses to undermine the legitimacy of women's claims within modern legal frameworks using a rights discourse (Stewart 1996). This leaves feminist lawyers and women litigants little room for manoeuvre. Some of the positions we reviewed earlier suggest a good deal of faith in formal legal concepts and in the power of arguments based on equity and reason to undermine the highly gender-biased legal culture.

A final limitation of the law recalls our discussion of legal pluralism, where we argued that some of the tenets of the formal discourses of law and legality, such as formal

equality and individual rights, do not sit easily within customary practices that are embedded in social relations. More than that, those principles, when applied to conflict adjudication or lawmaking, may lead to outcomes ignoring social relations. This is especially important when we consider one of the main ways in which policy advocates are suggesting that modified forms of the customary system should form a basis for modern land reform. Codification is being argued for by both the World Bank's Land Policy Division and the independent land policy advocates, and the World Bank is currently involved in some pilot codification projects. Lavigne Delville, writing about attempts to register customary rights in francophone West Africa, identifies many problems, even where original legal categories are created, derived rights recognized and restrictions placed on the rights to alienate land by the holders of other usage rights (Lavigne Delville 1999:17). Land tenure management is removed from its sociopolitical context and "becomes an administrative act", in which customary authorities are left with no (or a very limited) role to play. Registering customary practices produces "a radical transformation of the *ways of managing* land rights and hence the very nature of local landholding systems". This has implications for "the whole social structure of local society" (Lavigne Delville 1999:17). The point here is that the legal categories of administration and government rest on alienation and decontextualization—the very opposite of the sociolegal principles of indigenous local-level practices. Whether codification can (or under which circumstances it will) protect women's socially embedded land claims is one of the issues in current debates between women's groups in Zimbabwe about codification (Whitehead 2001b).

### ***The state, democracy and gender justice***

The array of agents re-appraising the customary is wide ranging, but one agent that we have paid little attention to is the post-colonial state, which has been balancing many contradictions for decades. In relation to land, different conceptions and practices have developed as carry-overs from the colonial period—although breaks with colonial policy have also occurred. Africa's many states and judiciaries have been actively making land and land tenure policy over these many years, but particularly during the structural adjustment decades. In interpreting its role as creating an enabling environment for foreign investment and in promoting liberalization, how have states considered the land question? Was titling a way of enabling? To what extent is the focus on new forms of land tenure an important part of today's post-SAPs (structural adjustment programmes) dispensation? The World Bank's attachment to the evolution of local-level systems of tenure and rental is, as we have shown, closely linked to its objectives of deeper and better land markets, and a belief that customary law will deliver—more cheaply and with less conflict—precisely the individual forms of possession that foreign capital requires.

In this scenario, the language of the customary masks modernization and marketization. It is precisely the recurring discursive power of "the customary" that is such an important feature of the gender implications of the current policy directions. The idea of the customary carries strong ideological overtones. It is a discourse within what Chanock (1985) has dubbed "the symbolic capital of tradition". Claims about the content of "custom" are rarely reported to have played a part in the local-level negotiations and struggles about changes in resource use going on between men and women.<sup>49</sup> The notion of

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<sup>49</sup> Carney and Watts 1990 is perhaps an exception here. See also Moore and Vaughan 1994.

rural Africa as a “customary” domain is more often an outsider than an insider perspective. Yet, as we have shown, current land reform debates are dominated by the term, at the same time as there is a good deal of debate and disavowal about its character. Many of our policy advocates prize the consensual and negotiated character of decision making—a stance, we have argued, that ignores rural power relations. Does part of the attraction of the label lie in idealized versions of its content, as well as the legitimacy it confers?<sup>50</sup>

The term is partly being used because it (often wrongly) implies that rules of land access and so on are long-lived. This is part of a much broader canvas on which practices and values are given legitimacy through their association with culturally specific ways of life of long duration. These more general discourses do not only belong to observers of Africa; they have a very lively currency within the elites of African nation states themselves. The ideas of African/traditional/good versus Western/new/bad have been an important rallying point in many contemporary African states. They are discursive resources of considerable power within many national cultures, particularly associated with bolstering the power of contemporary political elites, part of whose power base lies in so-called traditional offices. African states and their power holders differ in their links with the institution of chieftaincy, which is a point of change, as well as of continuity, in which the language of the traditional masks what is a contemporary form of political power. To the question, then, of what kind of a political alliance is being made in using the language of the customary, one answer is an alliance with traditional leaders and ideologies. But as with the “customary” itself, these are contemporary phenomena, part of the array of forces in early twenty-first century African states. The language of chieftaincy and tradition may mask many different kinds of economic and political processes.<sup>51</sup> Many African feminists are alarmed at developments that point to a renewal of chieftaincy and in the activities of elites claiming the legitimacy of tradition in some states. The language of custom has been used oppressively in the politics of gender at national levels in many spheres—from dress, to education, to the use of public space and of course in relation to the operation of the law and legal culture itself (Manuh 1994).

Where does all this leave women? On the one hand, we have some empirical evidence that negative outcomes for women in local-level negotiations and struggles for land are not inevitable. Women are seriously negotiating and making some gains in these processes.<sup>52</sup> The importance of labour for rural production means that women have a serious bargaining chip in their transactions with men and indeed have used it (Okali 1983; Mikell 1989). On the other hand, whether as wives, as sisters or as mothers, case studies show that women still have to fight harder and strategize more skillfully for their access to land. Widowhood, divorce, marriage residence and other lifecycle changes create uncertainties that have to be negotiated carefully. In doing so, women as well as men have recourse to discourses within the customary and to discourses within the modern,

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<sup>50</sup> See, for example, Platteau, who paints a relatively rosy picture of land access under customary land tenure (Platteau 1996:75) and Gopal (1999), who blames the harmful effects on women of recent customary practices on the changes brought about by colonial and post-colonial processes and not on the customary itself, and argues for looking at the *intentions*, not the actualities of customary norms and practices.

<sup>51</sup> In countries such as Cameroon and Ghana, the retreat of the state under SAPs and political structures at the national level have coincided with the resurgence of chieftaincy—a process strengthened and signified by the growing phenomenon of urban-based male elite figures becoming chiefs as an expression of their achievements and contributions to their natal villages (Goheen 1996:163–178).

<sup>52</sup> In addition to Yngstrom 1999, see Sahelian examples discussed in Leonard and Toulmin 2000, and Vellenga 1986 and Quisumbing et al. 1999 for Ghana.

whatever the formal or informal arenas of dispute settlement.<sup>53</sup> As Stewart argues, the issue facing women, in terms of law and their rights, is not whether to choose statutory or customary law, but how to maximize their claims under either, or both (Stewart 1996). The question for gender-policy advocates is what stance on the issue of the complex relation between the customary and statutory, as discourses and practices, can best underwrite these claims?

Women in Africa have many reasons to be disillusioned with the state. Many have a history of resisting women's demands, and there is a poor record of women's participation in government and in politics at national and local levels. The main holders of national power do not need to use the language of custom to undermine gender justice and women's claims. Recent manoeuvring around Uganda's new land legislation is instructive. Highly effective lobbying and alliance-building strategies by Ugandan women's groups and lawyers resulted in a spousal co-ownership clause being included in the draft land legislation. Despite assurances that this clause would be passed, the final late-night parliamentary sittings passed the new land law without these clauses. It remains to be seen if the subsequent bitter recriminations will result in amendments reinstating spousal co-ownership.<sup>54</sup>

Even so, the dangers that we have identified in the turn to the customary suggest that we cannot turn our backs on the state as a source of equity for women in relation to land issues—a point made more generally by Stewart (1996). Rural African women will not find it easier to make claims within a climate of anti-state discourses. It is true that many states lack legitimacy in Africa and that women find it difficult to get justice in male-dominated states, but the answer is democratic reform and state accountability, particularly with respect to women's political interests and voices, not a flight into the customary. At a more detailed level women's land claims need to be based on a nuanced and highly sensitive set of policy discourses and policy instruments—ones that reflect the social embeddedness of land claims, the frequent gender inequality in such relations and the rights to livelihood of African women.

The issue of how best to secure rural women's land access depends crucially on democratizing African states, but those processes must engage with issues of gender equality. The main problem is that women have too little political voice at all the decision-making levels that are implied by the land question: in local-level management systems, within the formal law and also within the government and civil society itself. It is here that we should return to the proposals from OXFAM GB and IIED. The political objectives behind their proposals are to strengthen those who have little voice in national decision making, especially rural farmers. The call for local-level management of land allocation is seen as a major buttress against the processes of land alienation that many national political elites have been facilitating. But there seems to be insufficient interest in making sure that women are among the constituency of farmers whose voices are strengthened. Using indigenous institutions is also open to potential abuses of power, and the operation of the "new or modified" institutions that IIED envisages does not take place in a vacuum, but depends on the way in which local and indeed national power

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<sup>53</sup> Manuh recounts how elite women in Ghana seeking to reform family law to get uniformity in inheritance rights for women couched them in terms of "custom", evoking flexible and fluid versions of customary law that required what was reasonable rather than a fixed set of rules (Manuh 1994). Shipton (1988) suggests some widows benefited from land registration in a Luo area of Kenya.

<sup>54</sup> The story is complicated by the fact that women in the Ugandan parliament were divided and not all of them supported the clause (Mwebaza 1999; Odida 1999).

relations feed into the new structures. Moving to community-based management and dispute-settlement systems does not necessarily undermine these power relations. The potential for making new or modified local-level institutions a site of greater gender equity is suggested by a recent study by Odanga-Mwaka. She found that Masaka Resistance Council courts were somewhat more progressive on gender issues than other local legal forums and attributes this, first, to the stipulation that one-third of the members should be women and, second, to the position adopted on gender issues by the Museveni government (Odanga-Mwaka personal communication).

Toulmin and Quan are aware of the power dimension to rural social relations and its implications for local-level land management. “The question of who gains access to land and on what terms can only be understood by seeing how control over land is embedded within the broader patterns of social relations” (Toulmin and Quan 2000b:6). There is a sharp contradiction between this point and the continued use of the term “customary”, which, we have argued, is a discourse that upholds, rather than undermines, social, economic and political inequality. Some of the work calling for new functions for local-level institutions or new local management systems carefully avoids using the term “customary”. Lavigne Delville specifically says it should not be used, but refers instead to local landholding systems and socially determined land use rules (1999:2). But, at least until mid-2001, this has not been the stance adopted in Toulmin and Quan and on OXFAM GB’s land policy website. There seem to us to be too many hostages to fortune in the language of the customary at a national level for it to spearhead democratic reforms and resistance to centralized and elite-serving state power. It certainly will not promote gender justice for women—either in the sphere of land access or more generally. There are simply too many examples of women losing out when modern African men talk of custom. Elsewhere, of course, both IIED and OXFAM GB are aware of the importance of women’s land rights. “Protection of women’s and future generations’ land rights frequently requires reform of existing inheritance laws, and may in some cases be incompatible with traditional leaders’ absolute authority over land” (Quan 1997:3).<sup>55</sup> The absence of sustained and serious discussion of how new functions for existing local-level institutions, or new local-level land management systems, will ensure that women’s land use claims are not systematically undermined is regrettable. It suggests that progressive policy making on land has its own box of institutions, networks, resources and discourses, while that on gender exists in another. It is high time for informed dialogue between them.

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<sup>55</sup> See also Quan 2001.

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## Chapter 4

# Globalization, Export-Oriented Employment and Social Policy: Gendered Connections<sup>1</sup>

*Shahra Razavi<sup>2</sup> and Ruth Pearson<sup>3</sup>*

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If in an earlier era citizenship was bound up with the capacity to bear arms and defend the nation, in more modern times it has been associated—both symbolically and programmatically—with a person’s capacity to “labour”, or perform paid work.<sup>4</sup> One of the key questions confronting feminists is whether the capacity to “labour”—a criterion that is inscribed at the heart of social policy arrangements across diverse contexts—works as an exclusionary principle, denying large numbers of women social rights of citizenship. In the case of advanced industrialized countries, as Orloff (2002) observes, historically men gained social rights (to pensions, unemployment insurance and the like) on the basis of their paid work, while women’s access to benefits was usually mediated by their relationships to men. She further argues that this set of arrangements has been fundamentally challenged by the movement of women into the realm of paid work: women have gained symbolic and material resources for citizenship as well as access to benefits initially created with male workers in mind. Their increasing presence in the workforce has also spurred the development of new forms of income security, such as parental leave, with some countries extending this to paid or unpaid leave for a wider

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The chapter draws on the findings of the UNRISD research project on Globalization, Export-Oriented Employment for Women and Social Policy for which financial support was provided by the Rockefeller Foundation and UNRISD’s core funders: the governments of Denmark, Finland, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing, Shahra Razavi was Research Coordinator at UNRISD.

<sup>3</sup> At the time of writing, Ruth Pearson was Professor of Development Studies and Director of the Centre for Development Studies, Institute for Politics and International Studies, University of Leeds, United Kingdom.

<sup>4</sup> Women argued that the capacity to bear children was equally important and should entitle them to citizenship. The “maternalist” demands for social protection and provisioning have been extensively analysed in the US context by Theda Skocpol in her classic (1992) study.

range of “domestic” responsibilities including the care of elderly or disabled dependants, or family illnesses and crises.

But does work as a route to economic and welfare entitlements have any resonance, or even relevance, in developing countries? Evidence suggests that women in many of these countries have significantly increased their labour force participation (UNIFEM 2000). To some extent the increase in women’s labour force participation rates is a statistical artefact; it reflects better ways of recording seasonal, unpaid and casual wage labour, although it should be acknowledged that much of women’s work still goes unrecorded (Charmes 1998). But it also reflects a number of real changes. More women must now work to ensure family survival—in the face of declining real wages and the increased monetary cost of subsistence resulting from cutbacks in public services and subsidies (Pearson 1999). A further reason, particularly regarding the increase in women’s labour force participation, is that there has been greater demand for women workers in certain sectors of the economy, particularly in export sectors that have experienced considerable growth in some countries. Much of this has been in low-skilled manufacturing—notably in garments, footwear and electronic products. This increase in demand for women’s work has been extensively analysed in terms of the comparative advantage of women’s “nimble fingers”, the docility and productivity of women’s work and the resulting lower unit costs attainable with the employment of “cheap” female labour (Pearson 1998). But has women’s growing presence in the realm of paid work, and particularly in high-profile factory work, been translated into more secure access to social rights along the lines suggested for the advanced industrialized countries?

What spurred our interest in this question was the curious absence of social policy concerns in the extensive and diverse feminist literature that devoted itself to understanding different facets of women’s employment in export-oriented industries (Razavi 1999). Some strands of this literature, by both neoclassical and heterodox economists, focused on wages and gender-based wage gaps in the context of export-orientation.<sup>5</sup> Other strands, more sociological or anthropological in outlook and approach, explored processes of gender subordination, empowerment and agency in households, communities and factories where women workers lived and worked.<sup>6</sup> Other writings, some by trade unions and women’s organizations, were concerned with working conditions in the so-called global factories (Edgren 1982; Heyzer and Kean 1988). This third cluster came closest to asking questions that related to “social policy”—in the narrow sense of concern for the rights and security of the workforce, highlighting the absence of health and safety provisions, the ban on workers’ rights to organize, and so on, but little attempt was made to link these findings to broader social policy trajectories and their gendered constructs.

We were struck by the fact that there had not been any serious attempt to problematize the possible connections (or lack thereof) between female employment in the highly feminized export-oriented industrial processes and broader social policy arrangements. The implicit assumption seemed to be that women’s work in export-oriented industries was taking place in a social policy vacuum. This, in turn, could have been attributed to three possible factors. First, that employment in globally competitive low-wage export-oriented industries could not possibly generate anything but a very low

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<sup>5</sup> Tzannatos 1995; Seguino 1997; Bhattacharya and Rahman 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Wolf 1992; Kabeer 1995; Hsiung 1996.

wage. Second, that coinciding with the neoliberal turn in state policies and the constraints imposed by “globalization”, women’s emergence on the labour scene had taken place alongside labour market “flexibility”, welfare retrenchment and the rollback of the regulatory state. And, third, that “footloose” foreign capital, considered as the main employer in these export-oriented industries, enjoyed special privileges in developing countries, which effectively absolved it of all responsibility for workers’ welfare. But, although at first glance these factors seemed to offer plausible explanations as to why women’s overwhelming numerical presence in export-oriented industries in the South had failed to translate into more secure entitlements or social rights, on closer scrutiny they were far from convincing.

For a start there was no theoretically derived a priori argument that we knew of to suggest that employment in export-oriented industries in open economies must be devoid of all social rights or social wage subsidies.<sup>7</sup> Nor did the historical evidence point to such an inevitability. After all, precisely the opposite argument had been convincingly made by political economists to explain how small open economies of Europe had responded to external vulnerability (Katzenstein 1985).<sup>8</sup> The vulnerabilities that more open economies were exposed to, these analysts argued, required greater social protection, social cohesion and solidarity, and the welfare state was a response to the challenges of economic integration (Gough 2000). Furthermore, despite the initial fears and hype that “globalization” would lead to the demise of the welfare state, by the late 1990s the evidence seemed to point to the continued dominance of national institutional traditions of interest representation and political consensus-building as important parameters shaping growth, employment and welfare objectives in the advanced industrialized countries as they sought to adapt to the pressures of globalization (Esping-Andersen 1996).<sup>9</sup> In other words, the gloomy prognoses of the lack of viability of European welfare states in a globalized world did not seem to hold up to scrutiny; generous welfare states have been, and continue to be, compatible with open trading regimes.

In developing countries export-oriented industries had taken root in national economies marked by different political economies and industrial strategies—from the more *dirigiste* or interventionist North-East Asia states that gave temporary effective protection to infant industries conditional upon export promotion, to the more “market friendly” approaches that seemed to underpin the emergence of *maquiladoras* on the Mexico/US border. Foreign direct investment (FDI) was not always the prime mover; in many countries it was national capital rather than FDI that nurtured export-oriented production processes.

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<sup>7</sup> There are of course economic arguments that suggest that in open economies wages have to remain low. As Seguino and Grown (2002) put it, higher wages, once a benefit in the form of a demand-side stimulus in more closed economies, have a potentially negative demand-side effect on exports and investment demand in more open economies—assuming, of course, that wage increases do not affect labour productivity.

<sup>8</sup> Katzenstein’s work focused on “corporatism” as the central institutional mechanism that allows the small open and vulnerable economies of Europe to respond effectively to changes in the global economy by compensating for those changes politically and economically. A parallel argument, but one without the political economy analysis, was reiterated more than a decade later by economists critical of the dominant neoliberal thinking. Based on a cross-country quantitative analysis, Rodrik (1999) documents a positive and robust association between an economy’s exposure to foreign trade and the size of its government; the most plausible explanation for this association, he argues, is that government expenditures are used to provide social insurance against external risk. In other words, social protection may be the only alternative to trade protection, if social disintegration is to be avoided.

<sup>9</sup> Huber and Stephens (forthcoming) accept that there has been significant retrenchment in welfare states in recent years, but in their view the retrenchment was generally moderate and driven by domestic forces (such as budgetary pressures, due to the rise in unemployment as well as demographic factors such as population ageing) rather than external ones.

Nor was the growth of female employment always taking place in a social policy vacuum. Some of the most celebrated cases, like the export processing zones (EPZs) in Mauritius and even the *maquiladoras* in Mexico, took hold in the context of national development projects that had fashioned nascent welfare states (which may or may not have been inclusive of women who laboured in the EPZs). Much the same could be said of the East Asian “success stories”. These states may not have nurtured European-style welfare states, but they underwrote the low money wages paid to industrial workers with a range of implicit or “surrogate” social policies (Chang 2001) or “social wage subsidies” (Hart 2004). As Chang puts it: “there were a lot more social policies in East Asia than it is typically believed, if we define social policy more broadly than what is the custom (which equates it with ‘welfare-state’ type of policies)” (Chang 2001:12). These implicit social policies included extensive land reforms, some protection of labour, public housing programmes, interethnic income redistribution and welfare provisioning by the corporate sector. The 1997–1998 crisis may have marked the end of an era in East Asia, forcing widespread structural revamping in the conduct of politics and management of the economy along more “liberal” lines (Woo-Cumings forthcoming), but it has also prompted a keen debate on “social policies”. Some observers argue that “globalization”, far from marking the demise of social policy in East Asia, has in fact given a new lease of life to policy interest in this area (Kwon 2001).

A key question that was not being asked, it seemed to us, was the extent to which these explicit, implicit or surrogate social policies were inclusive of women workers. As already noted, the analyses of women in export-oriented industries have tended to focus on women’s working conditions and remuneration rather than on the wider economic and social entitlements available to the workforce. Hence the nature of the interface between female employment in export-oriented industries and social policy remained an open and, in our view, underresearched topic. There are significant differences among developing countries that have nurtured export-oriented industries, both in terms of their economic/industrial policy traditions and their social policy arrangements (however embryonic they may be). We felt that it was important to highlight these policy differences in order to show that there was more than one way of nurturing employment in export-oriented industries—and with potentially different implications for women workers.

The challenges facing developing countries in the present era in sustaining viable social policies are legion. Putting in place inclusive social policies requires both financial wherewithal and strong state administrative structures. These are enormous challenges for many developing countries that are struggling to raise public finance domestically while being burdened with weak state administrative capacity after having undergone more than two decades of state “restructuring” and “reform”. Hence the second question we wanted to explore was the extent to which *access* to social policies—explicit, implicit or surrogate—is being extended beyond its initial narrow base to include the new cohort of women workers, or whether access has become more restrictive and exclusionary in the current era.

The other chapters in *Globalization, Export-Oriented Employment and Social Policy* cover a range of countries with different histories and in different stages of industrialization. They attempt, in their different ways, to tackle the questions raised above. In this chapter we contextualize some of their findings. But first a few words on social policy, since our discussion so far has already pointed to some ambiguities in how this concept is understood.



## Implicit and Explicit Social Policies

In the 1990s social policy became prominent on the agendas of a wide range of development actors. This rediscovery of “the social” (Mkandawire 2001) came in the wake of more than two decades of stabilization and adjustment policies that had monopolized the development agenda, and generated a sharp rise in income inequalities as well as persistent poverty in many countries. The apparent consensus on the importance of social policy, however, masks diverse, and often conflicting, conceptions of what social policy is, of the goals and values that underpin it and of the nature and extent of state responsibility for social provision and delivery.

Organizations like the World Bank now argue for some forms of “social policy” so as to reverse the worst excesses of economic policies, contain social unrest and enable the neoliberal project to move forward. Here social policy takes the form of safety nets designed to capture those who fall through the cracks in the process of economic reform, together with public provision of basic health and education services, grafted on to an essentially unchanged macroeconomic policy agenda with a focus on market-based criteria (World Bank 2000).<sup>10</sup> For others, however, the dismal social and economic record of the past two decades underscores the unsustainability of the neoliberal project on its own terms. These critics argue that an alternative approach to considering social policies as an afterthought to macroeconomic policies would start with the idea of “mainstreaming social issues into macroeconomic policy...[by means of] a rethinking of macroeconomics and of the organization of macroeconomic policy processes” (Elson 2002:1-2).<sup>11</sup>

Two important, though obvious, implications follow from the latter perspective. First, the distinction between “economic” and “social” becomes highly ambiguous—a position that has long been maintained by political economists and sociologists who see “the economy” and its institutions, especially markets, as socially and politically constructed (Polanyi 1957). Second, and following from the above, it underlines the fact that all policies (including macroeconomic policies) have a social content and/or social effect, and are thus *social* policies in the broad sense of the term. Deflationary policies that have been in vogue over the past two decades in both developed and developing countries—and that prioritize low rates of inflation—tend to benefit financiers while they denote stagnant employment opportunities. This stands in some contrast to Keynesian economic thinking, which underpinned policy debates for much of the post-Second World War period: social development—expressed in terms of *full employment*—was embedded within Keynesian macroeconomic policy.<sup>12</sup> At a substantive level then the distinction between “economic” and “social” policy is no more than an abstract dualism, and an effective way of pursuing social policy is to make explicit the social biases of economic policy, adapting both economic and welfare policies to achieve social ends.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> This shift in attitude on the part of the Bretton Woods institutions was manifest in the International Monetary Fund (IMF) programmes in Indonesia, Korea and Thailand following the 1997–1998 financial crisis where, according to Chang (2001), both the IMF and the World Bank put unprecedented emphasis on building “social safety network” devices.

<sup>11</sup> See also Cornia 2000; Elson 2000.

<sup>12</sup> One could of course argue that “full employment” was not a gender-neutral social objective. This is an important issue that is discussed in greater depth below.

<sup>13</sup> Also at the international level, labour unions and others concerned with global social justice have demanded that international trade regulation takes responsibility for its social effects. Although the demands for a “social clause” have been largely rebutted (for being a disguised form of Northern protectionism, and so on), it is important to recognize that the logic behind this approach is again one that rejects the artificial separation of the “economic” from the “social” in the context of international policy frameworks.

Informed by such a vision, UNRISD, for example, defines social policy broadly as “state policies, practices and institutions that directly influence the welfare and security of various groups within a particular society” (UNRISD 2000:9). The advantage of such a comprehensive definition is that it embraces a wide range of policies that shape the welfare and security of different social groups. The UNRISD document makes a further distinction between implicit and explicit social policies. Not all elements of social policy, it argues, need to be explicitly addressed. “For example, social policy may be embedded in economic policy, when the latter has intended welfare consequences or reflects implicit or explicit socioeconomic priorities, such as reducing politically unacceptable levels of unemployment” (UNRISD 2000:9). Macroeconomic policies belong to this category. Nevertheless some elements of social policy, it asserts, are more explicit, such as direct government provision of social welfare, in part through broad-based public services and subsidies. Social policy in this more explicit or narrow sense also covers income policy and social security systems, including pension schemes.

Yet, among those who want to see social concerns re-inscribed into macroeconomic thinking, there are different perspectives on how this should be done, and the conditions under which social forces can demand policy responsiveness. For some it is imperative to reinstate the Keynesian development vision, thereby legitimizing the pursuit of the twin goals of national industrialization and full employment. This agenda would require bringing both the developmental state and national trade unions back into the picture. It would provide the opportunity to build essential institutions for regulating aggregate demand and cross-border flows and the basis for an inclusive social dialogue in pursuit of security and prosperity for the majority.

Others, among them many feminists, argue that macroeconomic policy approaches that rely solely or principally on full employment to achieve socially desirable outcomes are severely limited because they fail to recognize different forms of unpaid “care” work that are just as much at the heart of provisioning human needs and ensuring well-being as paid work (Elson and Cağatay 2000). The failure of the twentieth century, they argue, was to legitimize *labour* but not *work*—like caring work, voluntary work and community work (Standing 1999). If social policy is to be re-embedded, then all forms of work will have to be legitimized in that process. The idea of constructing systems of mutual assurance around recognizing the different kinds of contributions that people make to society—and not only their contributions to paid work—is considered to be vital for devising systems that are inclusive (especially of women) and citizenship-based.

But this takes us ahead of our story. We will return to this debate once we have set out the main findings from the case studies elaborated in this volume (Razavi et al. 2004).

## Findings from the Case Studies

### ***The gendered construction of developmentalist social policies in East Asia***

The two East Asian countries in our cluster—Republic of Korea (hereafter Korea) and China—despite having different levels of income and being in different stages of industrialization, share a number of historical and institutional characteristics that are important to bear in mind. Emerging from decades of colonialism, war, conflict and insecurity, both countries built strong state structures (“developmental states”) in order to survive their tumultuous geopolitical predicaments, to develop and to “catch up”. In this

process of compressed development, markets were strongly “governed” (in the case of Korea) and suppressed (in pre-reform China) and the direction and pace of development was strongly guided by the state. Despite their divergent political ideologies, both countries implemented radical land redistribution programmes that left behind an egalitarian legacy in terms of wealth and income distribution (between social classes). It could also be argued that radical land reforms and a range of explicit or “surrogate” social policies, including the provisioning of social welfare by enterprises, have effectively subsidized industrial wages (rendering them globally competitive), dampened labour conflicts and provided a certain degree of legitimacy for the state and its developmental project. However, less widely appreciated in the mainstream literature, is the fact that these rather egalitarian societies also harbour starkly unequal and rigid gender hierarchies—reflected in their highly masculine population sex ratios (Greenhalgh and Li 1995; Park and Cho 1995)—that are carried over into the social construction of labour markets as well as the social arrangements and institutions for welfare provisioning.

The case study on Korea by Hyoung Cho, Ann Zammit, Jinjoo Chung and InSoon Kang (Hyoung et al. 2004) provides, to the best of our knowledge, a unique analysis available in the English language of the female employment/ social policy nexus in Korea spanning two different policy regimes that have marked the country’s post-Second World War political economy. As is well known, Korea’s early developmentalist era of compressed capitalist industrialization with spectacular economic growth and structural transformation was followed from the late 1980s by a gradual shift toward a less interventionist approach—a trend that was reinforced by further liberalization and deregulation under the aegis of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to deal with the severe economic and financial crisis of 1997–1998. Government intervention to force the pace of industrialization had been achieved through its close association with big business (the *chaebols*) on the one hand, and the banking sector on the other—the very structural ties that came in for sharp criticism by the Bretton Woods institutions after the crisis. The aim of industrial policy until the mid-1970s was to promote light industry, the output of which was increasingly destined for export markets. Thereafter and until the late 1980s, for strategic reasons, the focus turned to promoting more capital- and technology-intensive “heavy” industries and petrochemicals.

What is important to retain for our analysis is that from the early 1960s and until the 1997 crisis, Korea maintained an annual rate of growth of real GDP of about 8 per cent that generated what was tantamount to full employment for men, *increasing* levels of employment for women and overall growth in real wages averaging about 7 per cent a year. However, the extent to which industrialization, structural transformation and rapid economic growth reduced gender hierarchies in employment and gender gaps in wages has been limited (Seguino 1997). Our case study draws attention to a number of persistent gender hierarchies that mark Korean labour markets.

First, while from 1970 to 1997 women’s labour force participation rose by almost two and a half times, with manufacturing and services absorbing the greatest numbers from the growing female labour force, after 1990 (that is, even *prior* to the crisis) both the absolute numbers of women workers in manufacturing and the share of women in total manufacturing employment declined. This points to the “defeminization” of manufacturing employment, which has been observed in a number of other export-oriented Asian economies as well (Ghosh 2004, 1999; UN DESA 1999). In the case of Korea, despite the changing industrial structure resulting from the government’s promotion of heavy industry and petrochemicals, women were mainly employed in light

industries (which were experiencing relative decline) while the new capital- and technology-intensive industries principally employed men. In other words, the shift from so-called “low road” to “high road” industrialization has been marked by the gradual displacement of women workers.

Second, after several decades of industrial development and high growth, about 40 per cent of female workers had regular full-time jobs, while more than 60 per cent had temporary or daily work. The bulk of employed women therefore faced considerable insecurity and instability regarding their employment and income (with implications for their welfare entitlements, as we will see later). However, contrary to the common belief that all Korean males had “life-long employment”, Hyoungh et al. (2004) report that only about two-thirds of male workers had regular contracts. Nevertheless, the relative share of men and women within each category of employment displays the familiar pattern whereby men take the lion’s share of regular jobs, while women constitute a higher proportion of employees on temporary and daily contracts.

Third, despite gradual improvements in women’s wages, the gender wage gap was far from closed and gender wage inequality in Korea was one of the largest among the countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) for which data are available.

Finally, the case study confirms that the 1997–1998 crisis had disastrous consequences for gender equality. The earlier introduction of labour market flexibility allowed enterprises to rid themselves of regular workers during the crisis. This interrupted the slow progress that women in particular had made in accessing the more secure jobs, so that by the end of 1999 women had a *lower share* of such jobs than in 1990.

The Korean welfare regime has been described as “productivist welfare capitalism” (Holliday 2000): heavy emphasis was placed on social policies, which bolstered the regime’s developmental efforts and its attempts at nation building, with considerable investment going into education, health and housing. Employment policies until the 1980s provided “lifetime” job security and thus a certain protection for many male workers and their families. The case study also underlines the importance of corporate welfare throughout the period, especially for workers in the core firms (the *chaebols*), while noting that the pressures for corporate restructuring after the 1997–1998 crisis pose a critical challenge to this particular style of welfarism.<sup>14</sup> Finally, over the past four decades, four social insurance schemes—for industrial accident, pensions, employment insurance and health insurance—have formed the core of social welfare provision (together with a minimal public safety net). From a very narrow base their scope was gradually extended and reinforced in a substantial way in the wake of the financial crisis.

What the case study adds to the existing body of research on social policy in Korea is a detailed analysis of how far Korean welfarism has been inclusive/exclusive of women. The short answer to this question is that the limited provision of social welfare in Korea—even in the more expanded form that was implemented in the post-crisis period—has not delivered equitable access to women. To be more precise, the sectoral distribution of women’s employment, the size of the firms in which they were employed, the occupations in which they were clustered and the nature of their contracts combined to ensure that both the direct benefits of employment (remuneration, non-wage benefits, stability of

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<sup>14</sup> Corporate welfare originated in the 1920s during the Japanese colonial period and was largely the product of an arrangement between the state and the corporate sector whereby the former pressured the latter to provide non-wage benefits in return for financial rewards such as tax reductions and special loans.

employment, career enhancement, accumulation of savings) and indirect outcomes (access to social welfare insurance and security in old age) were generally less advantageous for women workers than they were for male workers. For example, more generous corporate non-wage benefits were provided by large firms, whereas the bulk of women workers was concentrated in the small- and medium-sized firms, which could ill-afford the same level of benefits. Moreover, even the key employment-related social insurance schemes were only extended to small- and medium-sized firms with considerable delay, and in any case could only benefit a small number of working women due to the high proportion of temporary and daily contracts. Even though small firms (of under five employees) where women were concentrated were legally able to subscribe to social insurance schemes, implementation of this law has been weak.

Whether the greater emphasis now placed on social insurance and social assistance can be considered a step forward as far as women workers are concerned is also debatable. Hyoung et al. (2004) argue that the gap in welfare between large and medium- and small-sized firms may have narrowed in recent years as a result of two parallel developments: first, the post-crisis corporate governance reforms causing large firms to scale back fringe benefits and, second, the fact that large numbers of workers in small- and medium-sized firms have become eligible for membership in the social insurance schemes. Whether this will indeed have an equalizing affect on gender disparities in access to welfare entitlements is an open question. Much depends on how thoroughly the extension of the social insurance schemes to employees in the small- and medium-sized firms is implemented. If benefits are strictly calculated on the basis of employment-related contributions, then the implicit bias against women workers is likely to remain. If, on the other hand, the government steps in with financial subsidies to compensate those who make lower contributions, then the potential for a more egalitarian welfare system will be greater.

In sum, Korean women workers have been at a disadvantage in terms of welfare entitlements under both the developmentalist era and in the more “liberal” (if not *neoliberal*) period of welfare expansion—largely due to the gendering of labour markets and the way in which welfare entitlements have been, and continue to be, linked to employment-based contributions. As Hyoung et al. (2004) point out, greater job insecurity and cutbacks in corporate benefits have provoked a keen debate in Korea on whether the country should proceed toward a full-fledged redistributive welfare state that embodies citizen rights and is financed by general taxation, or whether it should continue to rely on a system of social insurance that is largely tied to employment. Ironically, despite the deep gender interests that are implicated in this question, to date the debate on the future of welfarism appears to have been un-gendered.

Korean developmentalism was driven by strong nationalist sentiments. Feminists have often been critical of nationalism for the way it subordinates women’s interests to the larger goals of national struggle and nation building. Communist regimes, however, often make an ethical commitment to the “emancipation of women” based on women’s juridical equality, their entry into paid work and the provision of social rights to health and education—even though the “real socialisms” that took hold in the twentieth century used the political mobilization of women in highly instrumentalist ways to consolidate the power of the Party (Molyneux 1996). The chapter on China by Delia Davin (2004) is interesting because it illustrates both the considerable extent to which communism in China enhanced the project of gender equality and the persistent gender hierarchies and biases that proved difficult to dislodge. The Chinese style of economic and social restructuring—whatever its merits and divergences from the orthodox liberalization policies advocated by the

“Washington consensus”<sup>15</sup>—is, however, fast eroding some of the hard-won gains that an older generation of women workers made under socialism, even though Davin (2004) is not too dismissive of the prospects that have opened up for a younger generation of largely rural women in China’s booming export-oriented industries.

A number of pertinent findings emerge from this case study. First, it draws attention to the subtle ways in which welfare entitlements in pre-reform China were gendered. In addition to significant cleavages in welfare entitlements between rural and urban populations, it draws attention to disparities among the urban population, largely due to occupational status. In pre-reform China social welfare was largely distributed through the enterprise: state employees in government offices, state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and schools enjoyed the greatest job security and the most generous welfare entitlements, while those who worked in enterprises operated by local governments and by collectives had far less generous entitlements. This stratification had a distinct gender subtext since men greatly outnumbered women in the formal state sector and also predominated in senior grades.

Second, in the context of economic reform, the private sector has proliferated while the state-owned enterprises have come under pressure to become more “competitive”. The latter have laid off workers in large numbers, job security for life has come under attack for making workers complacent and enterprise-based responsibility for social welfare has been trimmed. It has been widely reported that a disproportionate number of workers who have been laid off—and who remain among the long-term unemployed—are women (Cook and Jolly 2000). As Davin (2004) observes, for a generation that was brought up to believe that women should be in the labour force and to draw their self-esteem from the contribution their work made to their society (and families), the impact of economic reform has been hugely negative.

These developments have posed serious questions about the future direction of social policy in China. The state has indicated an interest in developing social insurance mechanisms. However, in practice these systems still cover only a limited number of employees, while enterprises, even newly established ones in the private sector, continue to play an important welfare function. Needless to say, the ability of enterprises to perform welfare functions depends largely on their profitability *and* the extent to which non-wage benefits are perceived to be necessary and/or beneficial for recruiting labour—requirements that may be considered superfluous in the case of abundant and “cheap” female labour that is willing to make itself available even for a low wage and little or no welfare benefits.

In fact as Davin (2004) demonstrates there has been rapid growth of demand for women workers both in the export-oriented factories of the special economic zones (SEZs) in the coastal provinces of the eastern seaboard, as well as in the town and village enterprises (TVEs), reflecting significant transformation in the structure of the labour market since China reoriented its economy to global markets and undertook extensive economic reforms in the 1980s. It could also be argued that that the foreign-owned, export-oriented industries located in the coastal provinces of China profit directly from the social investments made during the communist era, while running these investments down (Hart 1995). The extent to which China can continue to capitalize on the benefits

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<sup>15</sup> The fact China maintains a non-convertible currency, state control over its banking system and a broadly “gradualist” strategy is taken by some to suggest that it violates some of the key elements of IMF/World Bank prescription for “successful integration” (Jomo 2003).

of earlier redistributions and investments in human capabilities, however, may be eroding very fast as the impacts of domestic liberalization (of both land and welfare) lead to increasing inequalities and the erosion of human capabilities (Croll 1999).

In the SEZs there is a multi-faceted labour hierarchy: most technical and managerial posts are held by foreigners, though some Chinese middle-class men also attain these positions, while the semi-skilled workers are predominantly female. Most of the permanent workers are local inhabitants who have worked for some time in the new industries. But the majority of the workforce is recruited from rural areas with temporary status and no entitlement to social protection or welfare benefits in their place of work. Migrant women suffer a whole series of discriminatory practices, including the impossibility of achieving permanent or settled status even on marriage. Most migrant workers are single women and those who are married have problems finding accommodation. Unlike permanent workers they have to pay for health care and their children are either excluded from urban schools or have to pay high fees.

Davin (2004) argues that the majority of women who work in the export-oriented industries come from villages where they had little or no entitlement to social welfare so that their lack of non-wage benefits in their new employment does not represent a loss of previously enjoyed benefits. However, whereas in earlier phases of the country's industrialization women as well as men recruited to the industrial workforce were awarded the status of permanent workers and offered a level of job security and social welfare (though unequally), this is not the case in the current phase of export-led industrialization. Wages and conditions are poor from the perspective of international standards and there is little or no union advocacy or representation for temporary migrant workers in export factories. Many young women migrants are well aware of these conditions and see employment in export factories as a temporary phase in their lifecycle.

What path is Chinese social policy likely to take in the years to come? Davin (2004) maintains that while the state may try to control the worst forms of labour abuse in the export-oriented factories, it is bound to make China's competitiveness in the struggle for foreign investment its first priority, and is thus unlikely to force investors to fund an expensive system of social security. The government will try to attract more high-tech industries that require a more skilled and educated workforce, which may mean greater willingness on the part of employers to invest in the welfare and training of their workers in order to reduce labour turnover and retain workers. Whether this will entail a gradual displacement of women workers by male workers is as yet unclear. At the same time, Davin doubts that the state can—or rather will—take the burden of social provisioning on itself. The Chinese reformers, like their Korean counterparts, have shown a clear preference for contribution-based social insurance that is linked to employment—an institutional arrangement that follows in the path of enterprise-based welfare systems. This development, as we have argued in the case of Korea, is likely to prejudice many, if not most, women whether as paid workers or as unpaid carers.

### ***Welfare state construction and retrenchment in Mexico and Mauritius***

Brachet-Márquez and Orlandina de Oliveira's (2004) case study of Mexico analyses women's access to employment and social benefits under the two policy regimes that have marked the Mexican political economy over the past 60 years: a period of state-directed development accompanied by import substitution industrialization (ISI) and welfare state construction; this phase came to an abrupt end in 1982 as a result of the financial debacle and the debt-linked policy conditionalities that ushered in a harsh neoliberal policy set-up

(deflationary macroeconomics, welfare state retrenchment, financial and trade liberalization), with severe economic and social consequences.

The history of social legislation in Mexico, as the authors underline, must be traced to the Mexican Revolution (1910–1917) and the subsequent corporatist arrangement that was forged between the post-revolutionary (and authoritarian) state/party and its important social constituencies (peasants, labour). The basic conditions for industrial employment were legislated in 1932—guaranteeing a minimum wage, paid vacations, severance pay, paid maternity leave, and so on. In this way, the state/party Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) sought to legitimize its own rule, which perhaps more than any developmental imperative animated state policy in the social field.

The most important development in the 1940s was the creation of social insurance. However, rather than slowly consolidate different groups of beneficiaries into a unified system to facilitate pooling and cross-subsidization (as in Korea), the beneficiaries were segmented into a number of distinct schemes with vastly different and unequal entitlements. Social legislation for those outside the formal labour force (that is, the rural population and the urban poor) was slow to emerge and meagre in benefits. Nevertheless, from the early 1970s serious efforts were made to sustain standards of living in the face of growing inflation by controlling the prices of basic items of consumption and exempting them from value-added taxation. As a result of these measures both the proportion and the absolute numbers of poor people diminished steadily until 1981—a significant achievement by any standard.

While women benefited from some of the general subsidies that the state offered on items of urban consumption, their ability to access social benefits linked to employment prior to the 1980s was limited given their relatively low rates of labour force participation (although some women clearly benefited from these social provisions mediated by their relations to male “breadwinners”). Women’s presence in the industrial labour force remained below 5 per cent for much of the 1930s and 1940s, and went up only slowly during the period of ISI (from around 13 per cent in 1950 to 16 per cent in 1970). Moreover, women industrial workers remained concentrated in labour-intensive industries where they received low wages and were even used as non-wage home workers with no rights to social benefits.

Much of this was to change as a result of the financial debacle in 1982, which provided an opening for the international financial institutions to impose a harsh stabilization and adjustment package on Mexico through debt-related “policy conditionalities”. As Brachet-Márquez and de Oliveira (2004) indicate, during the 1980s and 1990s, the period when women’s employment in industry and particularly in export industry accelerated, social provisioning—whether in the form of employment-related benefits or universal subsidies on items of basic consumption—was massively curtailed. At the same time deflationary macroeconomic policies choked employment and cut real wages. Whereas prior to 1982, in the so-called ISI era, the state’s pro-business industrial policies (low wages, high tariffs) were somewhat tempered by measures aimed at maintaining minimum living standards, in the subsequent period these implicit subsidies were increasingly eroded and/or targeted to a dwindling proportion of the “deserving” poor. Thus, with extensive income contraction, declining real wages and the rising monetary cost of subsistence, family survival has increasingly relied on the intensification



of women's *paid* work as a *distress* response,<sup>16</sup> as well as of their unpaid care work in both individualized and collective forms (González de la Rocha 1994).

At the same time, women industrial workers seem to confront a number of adverse labour market conditions. First, the proportion of women in the industrial labour force, and particularly in the *maquiladoras* or industrial assembly plants, has fallen in recent years as men have been hired in more technologically advanced industries and occupations. Second, the demand for women's labour has been extended, with employment growth shifting from the higher paying, better protected factories on the northern border to a range of small establishments and sweatshops in the interior provinces that provide work that is lower paid and less visible and has poorer access to protection and regulation. Finally, while there is some evidence that women workers in *maquiladora* cities, particularly in the north, are better protected and better paid than those in non-*maquiladora* cities in the interior, two provisos are in order. First, women employees in the *maquiladora* sectors (now not just confined to the northern border states) only have entitlements to a limited and declining range of non-wage benefits, and have little or no access to gender-specific support such as childcare provision or maternity leave—"both major necessities for women workers and de jure mandatory entitlements for all women employed in the formal sector" (Brachet-Márquez and de Oliveira 2004:150). Second, the incorporation of women workers in the export sectors has spurred neither the design of women-friendly social policies nor the extension of existing employment-related benefits to this new category of industrial workers. On the contrary, they chronicle a steady decline in the mandatory protection of formal sector workers in Mexico as state enterprises were privatized, large-scale retrenchments were implemented and domestic enterprises were squeezed by trade liberalization, which exposed them to competition from cheaper imports.

Another country where women are being displaced from export-oriented production processes is Mauritius—not because male workers are being recruited into skill-intensive production processes, but rather because industrialists are hiring migrant female labour in order to side-step the alleged shortcomings of the local labour force, such as its high levels of absenteeism and low productivity. However, unlike Mexico, Mauritius has managed remarkably well to fight off the erosion of its relatively generous welfare state, which continues to act as a bulwark against social dislocation and impoverishment, especially at a time when the export industry is shedding workers in large numbers.

Sheila Bunwaree (2004) provides a useful analysis of the efforts made to construct a welfare state in Mauritius along the lines of Western democracies—largely as a response to the island's deep-seated ethnic tensions and conflicts—and demonstrates how this attempt to provide universal entitlements (to health, education, pensions, food and housing subsidies) intersected with an ethnically segmented labour force. The issue of migrant labour and ethnic identity is not one that has been stressed in earlier analyses of women's employment in export production, although it has been an issue in countries like Malaysia.

In the early 1970s, Mauritius embarked on a major industrial development strategy—with the export-oriented garment sector as its central pillar—in order to diversify its economy away from reliance on sugar exports and escape the limitations of its small

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<sup>16</sup> As the authors show, women's labour force participation rates jumped from 21 per cent in 1979 to nearly 36 per cent in 1999.

domestic market. Crucially, in Mauritius export production was not located in an enclave-type export processing zone (EPZ), but was widely dispersed throughout the island. This particular feature of the EPZ facilitated the absorption of married women: more than 40 per cent of the female workforce was married and over 25 years old, leaving few untapped reserves of “cheap” female labour. As far as the ethnic composition of the workforce is concerned, initially at least the Creole population tended to dominate in the EPZ.

Moreover, the universal social provisions that were available to all citizens in Mauritius—such as free health care, education and pensions—were also enjoyed by women workers in the export sectors, almost by default rather than design (importantly, Bunwaree (2004) notes that there are inadequate health services for woman-specific conditions, and similar biases are evident in the Occupational Health and Safety Act, which tends to privilege health hazards that inflict male workers, rather than those affecting women workers, such as repetitive strain injury). It could even be argued, as the government’s own rhetoric on social development suggests, that the welfare state provided the country’s “social scaffolding”, which in turn underpinned its economic success. In other words, welfare provisions effectively subsidized the export-oriented production processes by providing a workforce that was educated, healthy and well-nourished and a society that was relatively cohesive. Much of the welfare state edifice was funded through the tax on sugar exports despite the controversies and vested interests that surrounded its imposition.

However, with the rising demand for workers in the early 1990s, the export-oriented sector came up against a shortage of “appropriate” labour. In the 1990s, entrepreneurs increasingly relied on expatriate workers from countries like Bangladesh, China, India, Madagascar and Sri Lanka to meet the demands for expanded and “flexible” production, which was required to compete with cheaper labour sites in Asia and elsewhere. These workers were often accommodated in dormitories near the factories. Although the recruitment of foreign labour was acceptable in the early 1990s because of the apparent shortage of local labour and the reluctance of Mauritian women to work anti-social shifts and overtime, the practice has continued unabated in more recent years despite the rising levels of unemployment (especially among women). This is generating considerable social tension and a certain degree of suspicion toward migrant women workers.

Managers interviewed in a recent study voiced a preference for expatriate workers because they “willingly work long hours and do not ask for holidays and sick leave”; they also praised the skills and speed of foreign workers, preferring them to local workers who “with their social and family obligations seem demanding, lazy and overall less productive” (Clean Clothes Campaign 2002). Moreover, while Mauritian women industrial workers often had curtailed social and economic benefits due to the dispersed nature of the production facilities, the evasion of social security contributions by small-scale enterprises and the low level of organization and unionization, expatriate workers have little access to any such benefits. Since their work permits specify that their right to remain in Mauritius is limited (usually to three years) and applies only to a specific employer, they are not in a position to utilize state-provided education services and their access to health care is also restricted. The nature of their contractual relations also precludes their access to unemployment benefits or old age pensions (since their right to residence is terminated in the event of redundancy). When the downturn in demand for exports occurred in the late 1990s as the result of the East Asian crisis and the prospect of phasing out the Multifibre Arrangement (MFA) (which has facilitated preferential prices

and access to European Union/EU and US markets for Mauritian exports), these workers had no protection from summary dismissal and deportation.

Mauritius is an interesting case. In terms of social policy, it is among the handful of developing countries that has aspired to construct a social democratic welfare state, inclusive of all its citizens. Moreover, despite the pressures from international financial institutions urging welfare retrenchment in recent years, the public provision of health and education remains free of “user charges” (even though there is evidence of growing private sector provision). In the initial years at least the export-oriented firms seem to have benefited from the social provisioning that was available to the workforce through the welfare state. However, since the mid-1990s the Mauritian EPZ—which continues to specialize in labour-intensive and low-skill products and has not been able to upgrade itself to more skill- and capital-intensive production processes—has come under severe pressure. Accelerated liberalization and globalization seem to have created the conditions for what some economists refer to as “immiserizing growth”, with constant downward pressure on manufacturing wages determined by global labour cost competitiveness (Jomo 2003). Under these pressures the Mauritian EPZ no longer seems able to hire a workforce with social and family obligations (even if these are somewhat tempered by the availability of welfare provisioning). As the above-mentioned study concludes, what managers seem to be saying is that to survive and compete in the global market they need a workforce that can make itself available 24 hours a day, that is prepared to do shift work and unencumbered by any social obligation.

### ***Late liberalization: The case of employment in India's export sector***

The trajectory of liberalization and the opening up of the economy in India have followed a different trajectory from the countries in East and South-East Asia. Jayati Ghosh (2004) argues that by the time Indian industry had been extensively de-protected—that is, by the 1990s—the feminization of labour in export processing had peaked in the rest of Asia; and a trend toward an increasing male share of export employment was manifest. However she suggests that, unlike in other countries, much of the export production in India took place not in large formal sector factories, but in the unorganized sector. Although accurate statistics on informal employment are difficult to obtain, she presents data from the Census of Manufacturing Establishments indicating that in the unorganized urban manufacturing sector the share of women also declined in India from 14.2 per cent to 11.1 per cent. However she suggests that a large proportion of manufacturing production has been shifted to home-based subcontracting activities in small units that are below the scale used for the manufacturing census, where employment is on the basis of very low paid piece-rate work with virtually no non-wage benefits. This is the result of the nature of industrial regulation, which has favoured subcontracting rather than growth and agglomeration in Indian industry, as entrepreneurs seek to avoid the labour protection and regulation that has been a characteristic of Indian industrial policy over many decades. Given, as she demonstrates, the fact that women are the overwhelming majority of the labour force working in the unorganized and unrecorded sectors of the economy, women's role in these sectors has not brought with it concomitant improvements in social protection.

Moreover, even in the apparently “organized” formal sector factories in the EPZs, women's employment has been precarious and unprotected. In spite of generally extensive non-wage benefits for women in India, including maternity leave and benefits, the right to organize and collective bargaining and specified minimum wages, these benefits are rarely if

ever actually afforded to women workers in export factories. Research evidence suggests that wages are below the government minimum wage rate, often being paid on piece rates rather than according to regular wage contracts. Working hours frequently exceed those laid down in the regulations, with no overtime payments for excessive hours. Basic health and safety precautions are rarely observed and women commonly face dismissal if they become pregnant. Given these kinds of working conditions, which prevail because the EPZs are constituted to lie outside the regulations for the protection of workers in the formal sector, the fact that women continue to form the majority of the workforce in these export sectors has not led to the improvements in social protection and working conditions of women workers. And while export production in India has continued to involve many thousands of women, the fact that much of this has taken place in informal and unorganized workplaces, including home-based work, has exerted downward pressure on pay, working conditions and consequently has not provided the political or economic basis for the development of social policies that support women workers.

### ***Export-oriented employment in South Africa: Neoliberal contradictions***

At the beginning of this chapter we referred to the European debates about the connections between open economies and social policy, and the argument that the welfare state was essentially a response to the challenges of economic integration. In her contribution to this cluster Gillian Hart (2004) tackles a rather similar set of issues, but from the vantage point of developing countries and seen through a “gender lens” (which explores the connections between production and the conditions of reproduction of labour). In doing so, she poses some fundamental questions about the viability of the neoliberal project on its own terms, particularly in the context of profound social inequalities.

Of the six case studies (China, India, Korea, Mauritius, Mexico and South Africa) in Razavi et al. (2004), in the recent decades, South Africa seems to have followed most closely the conventional neoliberal package (even without the policy conditionalities imposed on indebted countries such as Mexico)—of tight fiscal austerity, monetary discipline, wage restraint, trade liberalization, and so on—in the hope that this would lure private investment (both domestic and foreign), unleash rapid export-led growth (as in the East Asian scenario), tighten the labour market and drive up wages. However, as Hart (2004) goes on to argue, to date the flows of foreign direct investment have been negligible, while domestic capital has continued to flow out of the country and all indications are that employment has continued its precipitous decline. To explain why industrial production in small-scale, decentralized, Taiwanese-owned firms (destined for export markets) has operated so problematically in South Africa, Hart draws on her extensive historical and anthropological research in two contrasting localities of the KwaZulu-Natal province.

First, the Taiwanese-owned export-oriented industrial operations in this province have been the site of intense labour tensions and conflicts—to the point where their viability has been seriously undermined. Given the way in which racial and gendered differences were being constructed against each other, Hart (2004) suggests, the Taiwanese industrialists have been largely incapable of creating a negotiated labour regime with their predominantly female workforce. In other words the industrialists’ understandings of racial difference have undermined their capacity to engage with workers on anything but openly coercive and hostile terms. This has led to anger and resentment on the part of women workers who feel that they are treated in inhumane ways. Hart argues that “gendered constructions of localism and familialism, using the

idioms of kinship and paternalism, that are central to the way managers and workers negotiate with one another in different parts of Asia...are simply unavailable” to the majority of Taiwanese industrialists operating in South Africa (Hart 2002:192).

Second, and again in contrast to the situation prevailing in Taiwan and southern China, the conditions of labour reproduction in South Africa have been extremely unfavourable, given the way in which the workforce has been historically dispossessed and thrust into a radically commoditized form of livelihood. Ironically, these tensions have been amplified in recent years as the African National Congress (ANC) government has embraced the neoliberal policy package. Fiscal restraint at the national and provincial level has led to the massive shedding of basic welfare functions by the state (evident in the rise in service charges in the townships). Hart argues that the intensity of labour conflict in the industrial firms in KwaZulu-Natal derives not only from the inability of the majority of Taiwanese industrialists to deploy gendered forms of negotiation on the factory floor, but also from the *absence* of the sort of social wage subsidy that characterized Chinese and Taiwanese industrial trajectories. One rough indication of this “subsidy” is the gap between nominal and real wages in the two settings: while wages in the Taiwanese knitwear factories in KwaZulu-Natal were nearly double those in southern China in terms of the prevailing exchange rates, the real wages were almost 30–40 per cent lower. It is the absence of this sort of social wage subsidy that can, in part at least, explain the intensity of labour conflicts that have been unleashed on the factory floor.<sup>17</sup> In other words the absence of “social policy” in a harshly commoditized and unequal social context—driven historically by racialized processes of land dispossession and livelihood commodification, and reinforced in the dominant neoliberal climate through processes of fiscal restraint and welfare retrenchment—has effectively undermined the ability of export-oriented production processes to take root in South African conditions.

## Conclusions

To capture the diversity of gendered constructions of labour markets and social policy arrangements and how these are in turn shaped by both government policy and global forces operating in radically different ways (in different contexts and at different times), we have looked at the female employment/social policy nexus across diverse regional contexts. In this concluding section we attempt to draw some useful pointers from our case studies.

Globalization is a highly uneven process. Because state capacities differ, the ability to exploit the opportunities of international economic change—rather than simply succumb to its pressures—will be much more marked in some countries than in others (Weiss 1997:26). The two East Asian countries in our cluster—China and the Republic of Korea—have been, *relatively* speaking, in a better position to exploit the opportunities offered by global economic integration. Korea, along with a handful of other countries, was a pioneer in nurturing labour-intensive, export-oriented manufacturing in the 1960s and 1970s, and today China seems to be following in its footsteps. In this process they have provided employment for a predominantly female workforce. While there are serious questions about the terms on which women were included in the labour force (to

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<sup>17</sup> These pressures have been amplified in recent years by the influx of cheap imported knitwear items from China—the other side of trade liberalization.

which we shall return further below), it is nevertheless true that, in terms of sheer numbers of jobs provided, these two countries have been in a much stronger position than, say, Mauritius, Mexico and South Africa where export-oriented production processes remain weak and fragile.

And yet neither in the globally “successful” countries nor elsewhere have labour markets been a site of gender equality. The ways in which labour markets are socially constructed—the sectoral distribution of women’s employment, the nature/size of the firms in which they are employed, the occupations in which they are clustered, the nature of their contracts, the definitions of “skill”, and so on—reproduce gender inequality and embed those inequalities in access to both direct and indirect benefits of employment, including welfare entitlements. And yet, despite persistent gender inequalities, it is important to ask whether women have been able to register some gains through the labour route.

In the case of Korea, as we have seen, while labour markets and welfare entitlement remain unequal, it is nevertheless noteworthy that by the mid-1990s about 40 per cent of female workers had obtained regular full-time jobs (even though more than 60 per cent had temporary or daily work). While this record is far from ideal, the gains that women workers have registered are not negligible, especially in comparison to conditions prevailing in other countries. The serious challenge confronting Korean women workers is how to hold onto these gains in the face of increasing pressures for labour market flexibility. Ominously, the 1997 crisis represented a serious regression in gender equality: the ease with which enterprises rid themselves of regular workers during the crisis interrupted the slow progress that women in particular had made in accessing the more secure jobs, so that by the end of 1999 women had a *lower share* of such jobs than in 1990.

The other encouraging development in Korea—again in relative terms—is that, rather than retrench the different social insurance programmes that are in place, serious efforts are being made to consolidate different groups of beneficiaries into a unified system to facilitate pooling and cross-subsidization. Again, the extent to which women stand to gain in this process is an open question and much will depend on how strictly benefits are linked to labour market contributions. But the general direction in which social policy is moving seems to be far more enabling here than in countries like Mexico where there has been large-scale employment-related welfare retrenchment, in favour of narrowly targeted poverty alleviation programmes.

The situation of Chinese women workers in the current era also looks less encouraging than that of their Korean counterparts. In addition to the fact that large numbers of female employees from the state-owned enterprises have lost their jobs and their work-related welfare entitlements, the largely migrant female workforce that is now being recruited into the export-oriented industries has little or no entitlement to social protection or welfare benefits in their place of work. This marks a serious regression as far as gender equality is concerned.

Developments in Mexico have been highly contradictory. During the period of welfare state expansion, women were largely excluded from labour-based welfare entitlements, given their low levels of labour force participation. However, the period of economic crisis and welfare state retrenchment has coincided with women’s large-scale entry into the labour force in both export and non-export sectors with little or no welfare entitlements. It seems to us that much of the “global” debate about export-oriented employment for women has been implicitly premised on this kind of scenario. Needless to say, in a period of economic stagnation and welfare retrenchment, labour force entry

has neither facilitated accumulation nor acted as a conduit for welfare entitlements. As such, it has tended to be of a “survivalist” nature.

A very different scenario emerges from Mauritius. Welfare entitlements in Mauritius were won through a non-labour route, and the welfare state was largely a response to divisive ethnic politics. This citizenship-based model facilitated women’s access to welfare entitlements. While wages in the EPZs where women are employed remain low, women workers are nevertheless able to enjoy certain social provisions thanks to the inclusive way in which the welfare state was constructed. While Mauritius seems to have maintained its welfare state relatively intact, it has been far less successful in coping with global competition. In recent years levels of unemployment in the export-oriented manufacturing sector have soared as local women workers are displaced by more “flexible” migrant workers.

In South Africa, too, the export-oriented manufacturing plants remain highly fragile under the dual pressure of global cost competitiveness, on the one hand, and the locally and historically constructed system of labour reproduction marked by brutal processes of dispossession and commodification, on the other. This set of powerful constraints fuels intense labour unrest and conflict that threatens the viability of these export-oriented production processes. It is in such contexts of profound social inequalities that the contradictions of the neoliberal project emerge most sharply.

So to answer the question we posed in the opening paragraphs—whether paid work can be the route to welfare entitlement for women in developing countries—we can say that in the five countries included in our cluster only Korea comes close to answering this question positively, and even so the answer must be qualified with the important proviso that while a section of the female workforce has managed to attain welfare entitlements through the labour route, a larger proportion has not and many more women remain outside the formal labour force, as informal sector workers as well as wives and mothers. In the other five countries a combination of factors—the powerful ways in which gender inequality is constantly embedded in labour markets as well as the global and local pressures for welfare retrenchment—has denied women industrial workers the opportunity to obtain welfare entitlements through the labour route. In places like Mauritius where inclusive welfare states have been constructed, women have been able to access certain welfare entitlements, almost by default rather than by design. Elsewhere the pressures for labour market “flexibility” and fiscal restraint combine to deny vast numbers of women—regardless of their employment status—any meaningful access to welfare.

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## Chapter 5

# Secondary Education in the Indian State of Uttar Pradesh: Gender Dimensions of State Policy and Practice<sup>1</sup>

*Jyotsna Jha<sup>2</sup> and Ramya Subrahmanian<sup>3</sup>*

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### Introduction

Linking gender and education to the social policy agenda is not straightforward. Many questions arise, most of which hinge on the kinds of impact education is expected to have on human behaviour, capacities and skills, and on gender identities and relations. In that sense, education within the wider social policy debate is linked to questions of society and citizenship, understandings about modernity and national identity, and the recasting of notions of masculinity and femininity at different historical moments of time. The content of education, the impact of policy choices adopted in the process of meeting universal-education agendas and the ways in which equity and social inclusion concerns are addressed through public institutions, are among the several issues that arise in relation to the reframing of social policy from a gender perspective.

A central proposition of this chapter is that the focus on a minimum “threshold” for public investment, in turn derived from the analysis of rates of return to education, has contributed to the neglect of female post-primary education. Influenced by human capital theory (HCT), “gender” and female education have been central framing

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<sup>2</sup> Jyotsna Jha has worked for both government and non-governmental organizations, and for national and international agencies in India. She has conducted research and evaluation studies relating to various aspects of education policy, programming and financing. She has also worked closely with teachers and administrators on matters of equity in educational planning, research techniques, development of social learning curriculum and educational management issues.

<sup>3</sup> At the time of writing, Ramya Subrahmanian was a Research Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, working on issues of elementary education, child labour, social exclusion and gender equality

discourses of education policy, resulting in substantial policy rhetoric and concern about women's and girls' education as a lever of development and progress. In India, acceptance of this global rhetoric has been mediated by particular policy choices that have resulted in the neglect of the secondary sector, the rise of for-profit schooling at all levels of education, and a fragmented formal elementary education system, with particular implications for achieving gender parity and equality. This has resulted in a range of issues relating to female well-being being erased from the policy map. Girls disappear off the formal education policy agenda past the age of 14, at a crucial age when aspirations can be channelled into opportunities. In this chapter, we focus on secondary schooling, which we believe best serves the interests of girls, especially if supported by policies that expand its availability, address sociocultural constraints that exclude girls (both within society and within the school), and keep its costs low. We argue that the lack of policy focus on secondary schooling for girls is linked to the curious contradictions between policy rhetoric, on the one hand, and policy prescriptions on the other, where development visions are not matched by policy decision-making processes that can realize these visions.

Our choice of Uttar Pradesh (UP) as a case study is guided by three factors. One, UP is the most populous state in the country and also considered one of the most socially "backward" in terms of development indicators. Two, there is recent and high-quality research material on education in the state, on the political economy of education (Kingdon and Muzammil 2003), on sociology, gender and education (Jeffery et al. 2004) and more generally on education provision (Drèze and Gazdar 1996). Three, there has been a concerted attempt in the state to focus on reproductive health and fertility decline.<sup>4</sup> There are also innovative programmes for empowering women through education that operate outside the formal schooling system. Given the overall correlations drawn between fertility decline and female education, exploring secondary schooling for girls against the backdrop of this orientation toward fertility decline, on the one hand, and empowerment on the other, provides an opportunity to delve deeper into the gender politics of investment in females.

In this chapter, we report primarily on material garnered through secondary research, as well as field work undertaken to explore the status of secondary schooling in UP, particularly in relation to patterns of financial investment and provisioning of single-sex schools for girls. Our empirical research uncovered a vital consideration for gender policy analysis in education—the ways in which wider discourses get played out through particular policy processes at state level, which in turn are dictated by the compulsions of democratic politics as they are played out in India. In that sense, UP offers both an interesting case study and an impossibly complex one, given the multiple political actors who inform the education policy agenda.<sup>5</sup> Gender seems almost irrelevant in this tableau, although its very irrelevance is in itself a revealing insight into the ways in which rhetoric on gender equality that aims to please diverse publics—from vote-banks (perhaps) to union government and donor agencies—can mask actual practice. In that sense, the account that follows illustrates the "reality" of policy making in a developing country context—not least the opaqueness of the concept of policy and the difficulty of tracking what is or is not evidence of "policy" in an intensely political policy-making environment.

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<sup>4</sup> Notably through a large USAID-funded programme in the state—Innovations in Family Planning Services (IFPS).

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Kingdon and Muzammil's fascinating (2003) account of teacher politics in Uttar Pradesh.

The political economy of market and commerce, on the one hand, and complex sociocultural norms, on the other, find their own ways to influence the realm of policy and education system—often leading to inconsistencies between policy intents and practices adopted at ground level. An analysis of policy remains incomplete unless traced to its translation into implementation and practices at all levels. Policy practices need to be traced through penetrations and informal interactions at various levels, making it difficult to collect evidence following “scientific” methods. Much of the empirical information presented in this chapter is based on “leads” gained through informal interactions. It is particularly difficult to track policy practices when there is a conflict between vested interests of socioeconomic political considerations and stated policy priorities, as we found to be the case with girls’ secondary education in UP.

## **State Policy and Practice on Female Secondary Schooling**

In this chapter we focus primarily on the resourcing, management and provisioning of secondary schooling in UP, with a view to assessing implications for gender equity. Characterized by very low participation rates and a slow pace of change in educational indicators over the years, secondary education has not received the desired attention in terms of either policy initiatives or resource allocation. The increase in real expenditure per student in nominal terms at secondary level has not kept pace with that in elementary education. The major proportion of state expenditure has been on maintaining the existing provisioning, mainly on teachers’ salary in government and aided sectors with little emphasis on expansion of services. Instead, private investment has been encouraged by relaxing the norms and conditions required for recognition of schools and therefore compromising the range and quality of facilities available. A policy initiative in the form of infrastructure grants to direct private investment for expanding provision of exclusive single-sex girls’ schools has been diluted by allowing boys to be admitted as well. A gender-differentiated scheme of studies offering “feminine” subjects to girls further reinforces gender stereotypes. In an environment where the majority of out-of-school children are girls belonging to disadvantaged socioeconomic groups and where girls’ education is not a social norm, increased commercialization proves counterproductive. These issues are elaborated upon and discussed in the following subsections.

### ***Gender and secondary schooling***

Secondary education in UP is characterized by overall low participation rates and sharp gender differentials. While the participation rates are lower, gender disparities are higher than the national average. The overall Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) was close to 25 per cent during the late 1990s, this being only about 15 per cent for girls. The Gender Parity Index (GPI) for GER is only 0.46 in the state as against 0.65 for the country as a whole (table 5.1). Only about 27 per cent of girls enrolling in grade I reach grade X and only about 60 per cent of these complete the grade (table 5.2). Despite a substantial increase in enrolments, the GERs are not improving in the state, reflecting the fact that the rate of increase in enrolment is barely enough to keep pace with the rate of increase in the population.

**Table 5.1: Gross enrolment ratios at secondary level (grades IX to XII)**

Year	Uttar Pradesh				All India			
	Total	Boys	Girls	GPI	Total	Boys	Girls	GPI
1980/1981	32.1	39.4	11.3	0.28	17.3	23.1	11.1	0.48
1990/1991	23.82	34.79	11.15	0.32	19.28	33.89	10.27	0.30
1994/1995	25.51	33.31	15.64	0.47	30.95	37.19	23.82	0.64
1995/1996	25.45	33.36	15.48	0.46	31.00	37.10	23.80	0.64
1996/1997	25.12	33.04	15.17	0.46	31.4	37.55	24.42	0.65

**Note:** GPI (Gender Parity Index) = GER for girls divided by GER for boys. These are actual data; those available for later periods are provisional.  
**Sources:** Government of India (1996b) for 1980/1981 and 1990/1991 figures; Government of India (various years(c)) for 1994/1995, 1995/1996 and 1996/1997.

**Table 5.2: Crude drop-out rates and proportion of repeaters**

	Uttar Pradesh			All India		
	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls
Drop-out rates (grades I to V) 2000/2001	56.51	52.93	62.11	40.67	39.71	41.90
Drop-out rates (grades I to VIII) 2000/2001	61.02	56.26	68.54	53.67	50.33	57.95
Drop-out rates (grades I-X) 2000/2001	62.11	56.22	73.17	68.58	66.41	71.51
Repeaters (%) (grades IX and X) 1996/1997	13.84	14.88	10.68	6.49	7.02	5.57

**Sources:** Government of India (various years(b)) for drop-out rates; Government of India (various years(c)) for proportion of repeaters.

An interesting feature of girls' schooling participation in UP is that although notable gender differentials exist in favour of boys in transition rates from primary to upper primary and from upper primary to secondary—especially the latter—the trend changes when it comes to the transition rate between secondary and senior secondary (table 5.3). A significantly smaller proportion of boys studying in grade X continue with their senior secondary schooling as compared to the proportion of girls studying at the same level. Pass percentages are also higher for girls at both grades X and XII, explaining to some extent the higher transition rate at that level (table 5.4). A high proportion of boys join the labour force at this age, which is also partially responsible for their discontinuing schooling after grade X.

**Table 5.3: Crude transition rates for different levels of school education (1998/1999 to 1999/2000)**

Transition rates	Uttar Pradesh			All India		
	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls
Primary to upper primary	92.6	96.1	85.8	89.0	91.6	85.5
Upper primary to secondary	83.2	91.7	69.5	83.0	83.1	82.7
Secondary to senior secondary	40.2	34.7	56.8	72.2	72.9	71.1

**Note:** These figures have been calculated by taking enrolment in the entry year as a percentage of enrolment in the terminal year of the previous level during the previous year. This does not take contributions of migration from other states, repetition, etc. into consideration. Also, the fact that a large percentage of children never reach grade V, the terminal grade for primary education, is not reflected in this table.  
**Sources:** Government of India (various years(d)).

**Table 5.4: Gender-wise pass percentages for grades X and XII**

Year	Grade X		Grade XII	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
1996	37.01	65.61	68.16	84.17
1997	40.32	69.57	62.41	82.39
1998	18.21	54.92	46.31	74.24
1999	25.62	66.91	53.06	78.49
2000	24.46	47.19	60.37	81.88
2001	26.78	53.27	63.49	81.42
2002	31.73	59.39	62.34	84.56

Sources: Uttar Pradesh Board of High School and Intermediate Education (various years(b))

Relatively low transition rates for girls from primary to upper primary and from upper primary to secondary indicate that secondary schooling participation patterns cannot be understood in complete isolation. This is especially true for the fact that the largest drop-out incidence takes place at the primary level and only 38 per cent of girls enrolled in grade I reach grade V (table 5.2). As a corollary to this, the GERs at upper primary level are significantly lower than those at the primary level (table 5.5). A combination of a high proportion of drop-outs at the primary stage, better academic performances at secondary level and a high transition rate from the secondary to the senior secondary level indicates that although only a relatively small proportion of girls continue with their post-primary schooling, those who do continue perform better in examinations and a greater proportion of these are likely to complete the senior secondary level. However, higher transition rates at the post-secondary stage might be indicative of gender differentiation taking a different shape where girls do not have equal opportunities to join the labour market.

**Table 5.5: Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) at different stages of school education**

	Primary level (grades I-V)				Upper primary level (grades VI-VIII)				Secondary level (grades IX-XII)			
	Total	Boys	Girls	GPI	Total	Boys	Girls	GPI	Total	Boys	Girls	GPI
1980/1981	62.50	81.80	40.30	0.49	32.10	56.30	18.00	0.32	32.10	39.40	11.30	0.28
1990/1991	71.06	89.13	50.98	0.57	27.33	63.13	25.62	0.40	27.33	34.79	19.69	0.56
1994/1995	61.20	72.03	48.86	0.68	25.51	55.52	31.28	0.56	25.51	33.31	15.64	0.47
1995/1996	61.19	71.95	48.92	0.68	25.45	53.24	29.96	0.56	25.45	33.36	15.48	0.46
1996/1997	61.13	71.71	49.02	0.68	25.12	51.24	28.91	0.56	25.12	33.04	15.17	0.46

Note: GPI (Gender Parity Index) = GER for girls divided by GER for boys. Sources: Government of India 1996(b) for 1980/1981 and 1990/1991 figures; Government of India (various years(c)) for the 1994/1995, 1995/1996 and 1996/1997 figures.

### **The resource gap**

A perusal of the trends in the intrasectoral distribution in the education-financing pattern makes it obvious that, starting from the 1960s, school education as a whole received more emphasis in terms of financial allocation. This was a shift from the relatively greater emphasis being laid on higher education in the past. However, within school education, the relative stress in favour of elementary education as against secondary education has been greater, especially since the 1980s. The low priority accorded to secondary education, we argue, adversely affected the expansion of state-sponsored schooling facilities for girls at post-primary level, thereby affecting their participation. The absence of gender-segregated data for finances stops us from taking the analysis further.

Table 5.6 shows that school education accounted for about 70 per cent of total expenditure in the sector during 1951/1952, going down to about 53 per cent in

1960/1961. It then increased to more than 72 per cent in 1970/1971 and went on to occupy nearly 88 per cent of the total education budget in 2001/2002. However, the increase was largely due to enlarged expenditure on elementary education and the relative share of secondary education remained static around 30–34 per cent of total education expenditure during the 1980s and 1990s. What is more revealing is that nearly 95–98 per cent of the total expenditure on secondary education has been the non-plan expenditure, that is to say, the expenses incurred on maintaining the system and only about 2–5 per cent is being spent annually on plan head or on new activities such as expansion of coverage by opening new schools or improvement in the quality of teaching by providing more facilities or organizing professional development activities for teachers (table 5.7).

**Table 5.6: Expenditure on school education by levels (million rupees)**

Year	Elementary education	Secondary education	Total education <sup>a</sup>
1951/1952	35.03 (47.16)	16.78 (22.58)	74.29
1960/1961	60.32 (33.89)	35.03 (19.68)	178.02
1970/1971	364.26 (48.33)	179.48 (23.81)	753.701
1980/1981	1,714.47 (49.42)	1,097.20 (31.63)	3,469.20
1981/1982	1,882.91 (48.25)	1,379.97 (35.36)	3,901.80
1990/1991	12,109.42 (58.22)	6,149.82 (29.57)	20,798.40
1991/1992	10,659.08 (53.70)	6,781.22 (34.16)	19,849.50
1992/1993	12,146.87 (53.57)	7,670.17 (33.82)	22,676.80
1993/1994	13,335.88 (53.89)	8,034.28 (32.47)	24,745.90
1994/1995	16,101.16 (55.10)	9,505.75 (32.53)	29,221.99
1995/1996	18,621.84 (55.80)	10,881.83 (32.60)	33,374.74
1996/1997	21,306.52 (55.73)	11,976.857 (31.33)	38,232.36
1997/1998	22,521.59 (54.43)	13,498.13 (32.62)	41,375.12
1998/1999	33,168.06 (56.76)	18,145.52 (31.05)	58,432.71
1999/2000	26,892.21 (51.88)	17,546.05 (33.85)	51,830.51
2000/2001	34,271.07 (55.91)	19,156.93 (31.25)	59,865.41
2001/2002 <sup>b</sup>	34,446.74 (57.88)	18,041.08 (30.31)	59,517.16

**Notes:** <sup>a</sup> Including higher and other education; <sup>b</sup> Budget estimates. Figures in parentheses show the percentage share of respective level in total education expenditure. The above figures reveal expenditure on the revenue account of the Education Department. In addition, a small amount of expenditure is incurred on capital account of the department by other departments and ministries. However, together they account for less than 1–2 per cent of the total expenditure on revenue account of the department. **Sources:** Government of India (1994, various years(a)).

The proportion of plan expenditure or the new investments, on the other hand, has been higher for elementary education, especially since the early 1990s. This was the period when the Uttar Pradesh Basic Education Project (UPBEP) followed by the District Primary Education Project (DPEP) was launched in a large number of districts of the state. While the former was an exclusive project for UP and covered the entire elementary education sector, the latter was part of the national initiative and covered primary grades (I–V) only. Both these projects in UP were funded by the World Bank, the former being the first basic education project financed by them in India. Although the contribution of these externally aided projects to total expenses of the sector has not been considerable, they formed a significant proportion of the new investments. The total amount coming from external sources amounted to nearly rupees (Rs.) 20,000.00 million during 1993–2002,<sup>6</sup> which was about 82 per cent of total new investments on elementary education in UP during the period. The project design for both UPBEP and DPEP demanded that the state government provide about 15 per cent of the total project cost. Taking both external and internal allocations together these two projects accounted for more than 96 per cent of total plan expenditure or the new investment during the period. This means that the

<sup>6</sup> Based on estimates provided in the Implementation Completion Reports (World Bank) of the two programmes.



high allocation for new investment during this period was mainly due to the presence of externally aided projects and only about 4 per cent of the total allocations were spent on areas/items not covered by these two projects.

The neglect of secondary education in UP is obvious from the slow increase in expenditure per student in the sub-sector during the 1990s, especially in comparison to that at the elementary stage (table 5.8). In real terms, the expenditure per student rose by 8.6 per cent per annum for elementary education between 1980/1981 and 2000/2001 at 1993/1994 prices, whereas it was only 3.79 per cent for expenditure per student in secondary education during the same period. The annual rate of growth in real expenditure per student between 1993/1994 and 2000/2001 was 7.25 per cent for elementary education and 3.17 for secondary education. It could, however, be pointed out that expenditure per student has itself been significantly higher at secondary level and hence the higher rate of growth for elementary education is to level these two. This needs to be understood in terms of the different nature of education processes and educational management structures at these two levels. The high expenditure per student at secondary stage in comparison to elementary stage is due to the substantially fewer number of students, a significantly lower teacher-pupil ratio and relatively higher salary levels in the former. The size of physical infrastructure including laboratories and libraries at this stage is huge compared with the elementary stage and it is natural for expenditure per student to be higher. The low rate of growth in real expenditure per student at secondary stage, coupled with the fact that almost the entire amount goes to pay salaries, suggests a decline in expenditure on development and quality improvement.

Although it is difficult to surmise that the presence of externally funded projects led to diversion of funds from other sectors to elementary education, it is obvious that these projects forced the state government to maintain its own investment expenditure for the sub-sector. Once the project period came to an end, the state was also committed to maintain all the investments in elementary education—doing so at the cost of other subsectors is questionable. In the absence of a clear policy focus and any direction from central government or an external agency, no such pressure existed for maintaining or enhancing expenditure for secondary education in UP. As discussed earlier, the external agencies—in this case the World Bank—emphasized increased investment in primary education, though not always explicitly so, even at the cost of other sectors, on the grounds of a higher rate of social and private return.

The argument based on the rate-of-returns approach also ignores the point that the different subsectors of education are interdependent and lopsided investments could prove counter-productive in the long run. A number of studies on elementary school participation in India have indicated that the availability of schools teaching higher grades also encourages enrolment and completion at earlier stages.<sup>7</sup> A comparison of statistics showing girls' enrolment at primary stage in schools where only the primary stage is available, and in schools that provide education up to secondary level in UP, showed that the proportion of girls' enrolment at primary stage is higher in the latter.<sup>8</sup> However, these complications rarely receive attention in the policy-making process because of a short-sighted subsectoral approach followed increasingly by Indian states, especially since the early 1990s.

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<sup>7</sup> See Vaidyanathan and Nair 2000, and Jha and Jhingran 2005.

<sup>8</sup> These statistics have not been included in this chapter.

**Table 5.7: Percentage distribution between plan and non-plan expenditures on elementary and secondary education**

Year	Elementary education		Secondary education	
	Plan	Non-plan	Plan	Non-plan
1970/1971	12.24	87.76	4.93	95.07
1980/1981	3.33	96.67	2.17	97.83
1981/1982	4.39	95.61	3.07	96.92
1990/1991	8.34	91.66	2.91	97.09
1991/1992	8.06	91.94	6.04	93.96
1992/1993	8.26	91.74	4.78	95.22
1993/1994	11.81	88.19	4.27	95.73
1994/1995	12.73	87.27	4.32	95.68
1995/1996	12.84	87.16	6.19	93.81
1996/1997	13.52	86.48	4.61	95.39
1997/1998	12.95	87.05	1.66	98.34
1998/1999	11.84	88.16	3.05	96.95
1999/2000	4.18	95.82	1.42	98.58
2000/2001	9.33	90.67	4.64	95.36
2001/2002 <sup>a</sup>	7.03	94.93	6.07	93.93

**Note:** <sup>a</sup> Budget estimates. **Sources:** Based on figures provided in Government of India (1994, various years(a)).

There also exist other important linkages between different levels of education. For instance, the spread of higher education is associated with an increase in income levels and distribution, which in turn is associated positively with increased demand for girls' primary education. The quality of teachers available for primary education is directly dependent on the quality and spread of secondary education in any country. The availability of women teachers, which is considered critical for promoting girls' participation and completion at primary level, cannot be ensured in rural primary schools without encouraging secondary education among rural girls. Women teachers constitute only about one-quarter of the total number of teachers in UP, their proportion being lower than that in rural areas.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, it is difficult to achieve universalization of even the elementary stage without greater investments in other stages of education.

**Table 5.8: Expenditure<sup>a</sup> per student at elementary and secondary education levels**

Year	Elementary education				Secondary education			
	Total expenditure	Total enrolment	Expenditure per student		Total expenditure	Total enrolment	Expenditure per student	
			Monetary	Real <sup>b</sup>			Monetary	Real <sup>b</sup>
1980/1981	1,714.47	12,762,037	134.34	419.81	1,097.20	18 53 459	591.97	1,849.90
1990/1991	12,109.42	16,466,813	735.24	1,007.17	6,179.82	29 55 073	2,081.11	2,850.83
1993/1994	13,335.88	17,593,289	758.00	758.00	8,034.28	30 15 817	2,664.04	2,664.04
1994/1995	16,101.16	17,835,564	902.75	828.21	9,505.75	30 45 167	3,071.11	2,817.53
1995/1996	18,621.84	18,055,640	1,031.35	866.68	10,881.83	31 54 719	3,449.38	2,898.63
1996/1997	21,306.51	16,602,422	1,283.33	1,002.60	11,976.85	32 05 232	3,736.65	2,919.25
1997/1998	22,521.59	18,481,210	1,218.62	889.50	13,498.13	32 39 513	4,166.71	3,041.39
1998/1999	33,168.06	18,680,569	1,775.53	1,175.84	18,145.52	32 74 449	5,541.54	3,669.89
1999/2000	26,892.21	19,019,535	1,413.92	912.20	17,546.05	33 34 369	5,262.18	3,394.95
<b>2000/2001</b>	<b>34,446.74</b>	<b>18,049,991</b>	<b>1,908.40</b>	<b>1,142.75</b>	<b>18,041.06</b>	<b>33 18 222</b>	<b>5,436.97</b>	<b>3,255.67</b>

**Notes:** <sup>a</sup> While total expenditure is given in terms of millions of rupees, expenditure per student is in terms of rupees. <sup>b</sup> At 1993/1994 prices taken from Government of India (1994) (taken from Economic Survey, Government of India). **Sources:** Table 5.7 for total expenditure; Government of Uttar Pradesh (various years) for enrolment, except for 1993/1994 and 1994/1995; and Government of India (various years(c)) for 1993/1994 and 1994/1995 figures.

<sup>9</sup> See Jha and Bhardwaj 2001 for detailed analysis on women teachers in rural India.

### ***The policy and management context***

The absence of a clearly outlined policy and comprehensive management framework in secondary education further highlights the neglect of secondary education in the state. The lack of any comprehensive policy and focus to guide the resources and management of secondary education in the state makes it difficult to trace policy discourse as understanding is gained through reviewing reports of the committees, legal Acts, schemes and office orders.<sup>10</sup> Although Uttar Pradesh was one of the first Indian states to establish an autonomous board of secondary education,<sup>11</sup> and appointed a Commission for Secondary Education immediately after independence,<sup>12</sup> the issues of girls' participation in secondary schooling and making education gender sensitive has received scant attention so far. The Secondary Education Commission (1952) dealt with a number of important aspects but did not include girls' education as a separate issue in spite of large gender disparities existing in the schooling participation patterns. However, the report mentioned several measures, including building separate sanitary facilities and retiring rooms, and hiring women teachers in coeducational institutions to increase girls' participation.<sup>13</sup>

One of the important features of secondary education in UP as in many other Indian states is the vast presence of privately managed educational institutions. Secondary schools in Uttar Pradesh can be put into three broad management categories: government, aided and unaided private schools. Government schools are fully financed and managed by the state government. Aided schools are managed privately by individuals, trusts, societies or corporate bodies but funded almost entirely by the government. The government bears almost the entire recurrent costs of these schools by providing grants-in-aid for salaries. Unaided private schools are managed and financed privately but recognized by the government. While the government and aided schools charge no tuition fee and only nominal other charges, unaided schools are for-profit organizations and charge substantial tuition and other fees.

The proportion of government schools remained almost static during the 1980s and 1990s while that of aided schools increased till 1986 after which no new school was brought under the grants-in-aid scheme. The growth of private unaided secondary schools has been spectacular during the 1980s and 1990s. The number increased from a modest 845 in 1994/1995 to 6,541 in 2001/2002, registering a nearly eight-fold increase. The proportion of private schools, especially unaided ones, went to more than half of total secondary schools in UP after the bifurcation of the state, reflecting the fact that the newly carved state, Uttaranchal, had a higher number of government and aided schools (table 5.9). Near stagnation in the number of government and aided schools that charge only minimal fees and expansion only through fee-charging private unaided schools reflect the state's policy of promoting commercialization. This is despite the fact that there is apparently a greater demand for admissions in government schools than in private (including aided) ones because of a common perception that these have better resources and are of a higher quality.<sup>14</sup> The results of the terminal stages at grade X and

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<sup>10</sup> Office orders are executive measures often based on decisions taken by the bureaucracy that do not require the approval of elected legislative bodies.

<sup>11</sup> The Board of High School and Intermediate Examinations was established as an autonomous body functioning under the Directorate of Secondary Education in 1922 in UP.

<sup>12</sup> A special Secondary Education Commission (known as Acharya Narendra Dev Committee) was appointed in UP; it submitted its report in 1953.

<sup>13</sup> Based on Sharadindu 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Based on personal interactions with people and functionaries belonging to government and private school systems.

XII of all schools affiliated to the UP board indicate that this perception is not ill-founded (table 5.10).

**Table 5.9: Percentage distribution of secondary schools by management**

Year	Secondary schools (grades IX–XII)			
	Government and local bodies	Aided	Private Unaided	Total
1980/1981	16.04	N/A	N/A	83.95
1990/1991	17.79	73.86	8.34	82.20
1994/1995	23.00	64.85	12.25	77.0
1995/1996	22.96	64.41	12.15	77.04
1996/1997	22.87	64.61	12.45	77.13
2001/2002 <sup>a</sup>	4.70	38.50	56.80	95.20

**Notes:** <sup>a</sup> 2001/2002 distribution denotes the position of schools that remained in UP after the bifurcation of the state into Uttar Pradesh and Uttaranchal. N/A=Not available. **Sources:** Government of India (various years(c)) for 1994/1995, 1995/1996 and 1996/1997; Government of Uttar Pradesh (various years).

**Table 5.10: Number of examinees and pass percentages in different types of schools (grade X and grade XII examinations, 2002)**

	Grade X examinations				Grade XII examinations			
	Govt. schools	Aided schools	Unaided schools	Others	Govt. schools	Aided schools	Unaided schools	Others
Number of schools	464 (5.09)	4,467 (48.97)	3,917 (42.94)	273 (2.99)	237 (4.56)	3,506 (67.42)	1,301 (25.02)	156 (3.0)
Number of examinees	80,267 (4.16)	1,043,817 (55.02)	706,016 (37.21)	68,531 (3.61)	44,499 (6.87)	473,530 (73.09)	118,962 (18.36)	10,869 (1.68)
Number of students passed	78,920 (4.47)	421,868 (53.13)	310,199 (39.07)	26,367 (3.32)	32,922 (7.0)	341,978 (72.79)	86,695 (18.45)	8,239 (1.75)
Pass percentages	45.01	40.42	43.94	38.47	73.98	72.22	72.88	75.80
% of schools with 0–20% pass rate	14.65	18.27	16.93	56.77	0.42	0.77	1.31	2.56

**Note:** Figures in parentheses depict percentages for respective types of schools. **Source:** Data provided by the Board for Secondary and Intermediate Education, Uttar Pradesh.

The increased focus on commercializing secondary education has negative implications for girls’ participation. In a situation where girls’ education is not valued, the demand for a fee-charging school system is bound to be low as parents would not be willing to pay high charges for their daughters’ education. As mentioned earlier, the increase in schooling participation at the primary level witnessed during the 1990s is largely on account of demand from poorer and disadvantaged sections, whose capacity to pay is also limited. The continuation of schooling for girls from these sections depends crucially on state support and increased commercialization works against that. But, ironically, the only two schemes started to support girls’ education during the late 1990s focused on promoting unaided, fee-charging schools. These two schemes were meant to direct private investments toward the opening of single-sex schools for girls, but even these were subverted, further discouraging girls’ access to secondary schooling. How political considerations successfully subverted the policy goal is discussed in detail in the next section.

The massive presence of privately managed aided and unaided schools makes the role of the regulatory framework crucial. A regulatory framework is important for directing resources and provisioning, maintaining essential physical facilities and an adequate number of teachers, and improving the quality of teaching/learning processes,

in order to establish a system of accountability. Perusal of the existing norms, guidelines and directives indicates a near absence of accountability mechanisms not only for unaided schools but also for aided schools that survive on substantial grants from the state exchequer. Gender focus even in terms of ensuring facilities and creating an enabling environment for girls is entirely lacking.

Successive committees and national policy statements have highlighted the need for an increase in the number of women teachers in the light of parental insecurity and the resultant restricted mobility of girls, as well as the need to create an enabling environment by providing positive role models in an otherwise non-inspiring environment. This is especially true for rural areas. However, the state does not have any policy of reservation for hiring women teachers at secondary level either in government or aided schools. Though the government funds the entire salary bill for aided schools—making this item the single largest constituent of the government’s expenditure on this subsector—and the teachers enjoy all the advantages of government service, no regulatory frame for their recruitment and conduct exists in the state. Teachers from government and aided schools enjoy substantial political clout and resist any effort to have accountability measures put in place. Kingdon and Muzzamil’s (2003) research shows that UP is one of only four states that have an upper chamber of the state legislature, and teachers have guaranteed representation in this body. They note two kinds of political influence:

Political influence has been of two types: one, from above which has been instrumental in shaping the education system; and two, the lobbying and pressure groups from within the system originating at the local levels (and uniting at the state-level) in the form of organizations of teachers. *Education-related legislation in UP has often been framed under immense lobbying pressure from teachers, particularly at the primary and secondary levels. Teachers in school (as opposed to higher education) have been instrumental in determining the local base of political parties in the state.* (Kingdon and Muzzamil 2003:6, emphasis added)

### **Provisioning female secondary education: The politics of investment**

Since pre-independence days, UP has followed the practice of providing single-sex schools at all stages of education. Considering the fact that, for primary age-group children, the availability of a school within reach was more important for the participation of both girls and boys than the school being single-sex, the provision was discontinued at primary level during the 1970s. This measure was based, and perhaps rightly so, on the belief that girls in this age group are young and parents do not mind sending their daughters to a coeducational institution provided it is not situated far from their habitation. However, the same logic does not apply to the secondary level as parents are reluctant to send their adolescent daughters to coeducational schools. Therefore, the availability of single-sex schools becomes critical at this level. Tables 5.11 and 5.12 show that the number of single-sex secondary schools has been increasing throughout the second half of the last century—the rate of growth being the highest during the first 30 years of independence, that is to say, during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. The annual rate of growth slowed during the 1980s and early 1990s but picked up again in the late 1990s. Although disaggregated statistics by management are not available, it is obvious that the increase in the number of single-sex schools for girls during the late 1990s is largely on account of unaided schools. No new school was added in the grants-in-aid category and the number of new schools upgraded to secondary level in the government sector was not large. The increase in the number of unaided girls’ schools during the late 1990s can be attributed

directly to two schemes introduced during this period, aimed at creating incentives for investment in secondary single-sex schools for girls.

**Table 5.11: Growth of schools**

	Number of educational institutions								
	Primary education			Upper primary level (grades VI–VIII)			Secondary level (grades IX–XII)		
	Total	Girls (single-sex)	Per cent of girls to total	Total	Girls (single-sex)	Per cent of girls to total	Total	Girls (single-sex)	Per cent of girls to total
1950/1951	31,979	2,520	7.88	2,854	468	16.3	987	154	15.6
1960/1961	40,083	4,927	7.93	4,335	661	15.2	1,771	282	15.9
1970/1971	62,127	11,624	18.71	8,787	2,008	22.8	3,415	581	17.0
1980/1981	70,606			13,555	3,200	23.6	5,178	758	14.6
1985/1986	73,490			14,728	3,377	22.9	5,709	848	14.8
1990/1991	77,111			15,072	3,319	22.0	5,999	886	14.7
1991/1992	78,085			15,328	3,447	22.4	6,060	889	14.6
1992/1993 <sup>a</sup>	74,889			17,730	3,610	20.4	6,115	560	9.2
1993/1994	79,522			15,546	3,509	22.5	6,637	962	14.4
1994/1995	82,023	N/A	N/A	15,976	3,817	23.8	6,637	962	14.4
1995/1996 <sup>a</sup>	88,817			19,516	2,651	13.6	6,977	1,042	14.9
1996/1997	91,093			19,917	2,746	13.7	7,003	1,057	15.0
1997/1998	92,554			20,436	2,960	14.4	7,135	1,127	15.7
1998/1999	94,476			20,675	3,051	14.7	8,339	1,364	16.3
1999/2000	96,764			21,678	3,237	14.9	8,549	1,427	16.6
2000/2001 <sup>b</sup>	86,361			19,639	3,021	15.3	8,459	1,501	17.7
2001/2002	88,927			20,429	3,102	15.1	9,063	1,608	17.7

**Notes:** <sup>a</sup> For these particular years, issues of the Government of Uttar Pradesh publication were not available to the researchers. <sup>b</sup> The state was bifurcated in 2000 into Uttar Pradesh and Uttaranchal. Hence, the number of schools shown in 2000/2001 and 2001/2002 does not include those located in Uttaranchal. Hence all trend analysis is up to 1999/2000. N/A=Not available. **Sources:** Government of Uttar Pradesh (various years); Government of India (1996a) for 1992/1993 data; Government of India (various years(c)) for 1995/1996 data.

**Table 5.12: Annual growth rate for the number of institutions at different school levels**

Year	Primary level (grades I–V)	Upper primary level (grades VI–VIII)		Secondary level (grades IX–XII)	
	Total	Total	Girls (Single-sex)	Total	Girls (Single-sex)
1950/1951 to 1980/1981	4.03	12.49	19.46	14.35	15.69
1980/1981 to 1990/1991	0.92	1.12	0.37	1.58	1.69
1990/1991 to 1994/1995	1.59	1.50	3.75	2.66	2.14
1994/1995 to 1999/2000	3.59	7.14	-3.04	5.76	9.67
1990/1991 to 1999/2000	2.83	5.24	-0.27	4.72	6.78

**Source:** Calculated on the basis of data in table 5.11.

The first of these two schemes was introduced by the state government of UP in 1997, making any new private single-sex school for girls opened in a hitherto uncovered block headquarters eligible for a one-time infrastructure grant of Rupees (Rs.) 1 million. Once all the block<sup>15</sup> headquarters were covered, a new scheme was brought to provide Rs. 2 million to any new girls' school being opened in an uncovered *nyaya panchayat*.<sup>16</sup> The fact that a good number of unaided private girls' secondary schools were opened reflects a positive response to these schemes. However, these are fee-charging schools with no aid from the government for paying salaries or covering any other recurrent

<sup>15</sup> A block is a subdistrict administrative unit in India that usually covers approximately 50 to 100 primary schools.

<sup>16</sup> *Nyaya panchayat* (system of dispute resolution at village level) is a smaller administrative unit covering several villages and about 15–20 primary schools.

expenditure, meaning they have to survive on their own revenue, of which fees collected from parents are the main source. The demand for fee-charging private schools for girls in these interior areas did not seem to take off. As mentioned earlier, the low value placed on girls' education and the minimal paying capacity of poorer households both contribute to keeping the demand for fee-charging girls' schools down. The owners of the schools opened under these schemes demanded that they be allowed to admit boys as well. Initially, in 1999, all such schools were apparently allowed to admit boys by an executive office order, which was later revised after a gap of two years. Under the revised order,<sup>17</sup> only schools located in rural areas were allowed to admit both boys and girls, implying that schools opened under this scheme and located in urban areas could not admit boys. Separate statistics for enrolment indicating the proportion of boys and girls in these schools are not available in the public domain.

This experience shows that girls' schooling participation in rural areas cannot be promoted by the expansion of provisioning through fee-charging schools. It also reveals the role of political considerations in policy making and implementation. While the larger concern for girls' education at the national and international levels made it a good political decision to have directed schemes to improve provisioning of girls' schools, narrow political considerations at the local level demanded measures that subverted the very basis of allowing a subsidy for a private enterprise. Most of these schools were opened by local politicians who first used the scheme to access public money for their private initiative and later exercised their political influence to get an order passed allowing them to make their enterprise initially viable and later profitable. These facts are not easily traceable as the available aggregate statistics do not provide any pointers and only a deeper analysis of executive office orders and other such directives help reveal such subversive attempts.

The rate of growth in enrolment slowed during the 1990s, especially in the later part of the decade, for all stages of education. The growth rate for girls' enrolment, however, has been higher as compared to boys at all stages. This is natural as girls constitute the vast majority of out-of-school children in all age groups. Nonetheless, despite the higher growth rate for enrolment, girls constitute only about 36 to 39 per cent of total enrolment at primary and upper primary stages and only 26 per cent at secondary stage in 2001/2002. The fact that a major expansion has taken place at secondary stages in fee-charging private unaided schools is certainly one of the factors in the slowing down of the enrolment growth rate in the 1990s for both boys and girls, especially for the latter. In an environment where girls' education is not a highly valued choice, increased commercialization is bound to act against their schooling participation.

The above analysis makes it clear that secondary education in UP is characterized by a resource gap in public funding with its implications for the expansion of provisioning at this stage. As a corollary to this there has been an increasing focus on promoting commercialization through direct and indirect measures. Commercialization has not been complemented by a suitable regulatory framework outlining directions and accountability mechanisms, which has allowed market forces and political considerations to play an unchecked role. The absence of concrete and foolproof interventions to enhance appropriate provisioning for girls' education proves that there is more rhetoric than substance. The fact that the rate of growth for boys' enrolment has been even slower than that for girls shows that increased privatization has hurt their participation as well.

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<sup>17</sup> The revised order (number 2501-8-2001-3009 | 5 | / 94) of the state government is dated 17 August 2001; it amended the order (number 15-8-99-3009 | 5 | / 94) issued on 29 September 1999.

***The sociocultural context, gender stereotyping and the secondary curriculum***

The fact that, despite very low enrolment ratios for girls at the secondary level in UP, fee-charging single-sex schools for girls have failed to attract adequate numbers of girls in the state indicates a lack of sufficient demand for secondary schooling of girls, at least in rural areas. It also shows that, though provisioning plays an important role, provisioning alone, particularly through private profit-making institutions, is not the way to increase girls' participation at the secondary stage of schooling. However, no policy initiative aimed at influencing demand for education can be found at the secondary stage in UP. Some scholarship schemes exist for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe students but they are not necessarily meant for girls. The coverage is also extremely small and they constitute less than 1 per cent of total expenditure on secondary education. However, it is important to recognize that several schemes exist, focusing on encouraging girls' enrolment at primary and upper primary levels and these appear to have played their role in increasing participation at those stages and to some extent at secondary stage as well. These schemes include free textbooks and provision for scholarships for girls. Under UPBEP and DPEP, efforts were also made to review the textbooks for gender bias and to train teachers for gender sensitivity.

The scheme of studies, curriculum design and content at secondary and senior secondary stages could itself be an important means of initiating a change in existing gender positions and could influence the constructs of masculinity and femininity in society. In this context, the 1968 national policy's emphasis on undifferentiated curriculum up to grade X assumes some significance. The role of pressures to join "womanly" courses, the non-availability of non-traditional courses for girls and women, gender stereotypes in both the official and the hidden curricula, and the negative attitude of teachers have all been recognized as constraints by the Ramamurti Committee report (1991), which formed the basis of the Programme of Action (POA), 1992. Although it is not possible to delve into all these aspects of the curriculum, the analysis undertaken shows that some of the existing practices in UP reinforce rather than question gender stereotyping. Apart from the fact that the curriculum design has no space for some critical skills, information and knowledge areas crucial for adolescent girls in their specific contexts, the existing scheme of studies also practises gender differentiation to the disadvantage of girls.

With the adoption of the 10+2+3 system and a unified curricular approach, the state adopted a new scheme of studies in 1998, under which all students were supposed to complete seven subjects successfully, including five subjects where there is little or no choice: science, social science, Hindi, a second Indian language and mathematics. While mathematics is compulsory for boys, it is not so for girls, who can opt for home science instead. The state offers two types of courses in mathematics—mathematics and elementary mathematics. While boys can choose between these two, girls have the additional option of home science. This practice not only goes against the very philosophy of an undifferentiated curriculum, but also strengthens the existing stereotype that girls are not capable of doing well in mathematics. What makes the situation worse is that the majority of single-sex girls' schools in rural areas do not offer the choice of mathematics—the only available options being elementary mathematics and home science. In the case of two additional subjects where students have wider choices available, the single-sex girls' schools usually offer limited options of "womanly" subjects such as sewing, cooking and so on. The scheme provides for a number of options including "non-womanly" courses such as commerce, agriculture and accountancy, but most of these are not offered in the majority of girls' schools and students are forced to choose from among whatever is available.



The rationale for having the choice of elementary mathematics, home science and “womanly” optional subjects stems from the need to respond to “demand”. The very presence of this option of home science in place of mathematics for girls strengthens the existing notions of masculinity and femininity. It is rarely realized that the school is also responsible for creating “demand”, not only responding to it. In any case these are reflections of societal expectations of the feminine role and whether girls are also interested in these has rarely been investigated. Societal expectations and family pressures to opt for “womanly” subjects find an expression in this choice. Moreover, schools strengthen the demand for stereotyped courses since the choice of opting for non-womanly subjects is only notional in most of the single-sex girls’ schools. The “practical” problem of not finding enough teachers for mathematics and other such subjects to teach in girls’ schools is often cited as a reason for not offering the course, as it is not considered viable to have a teacher if only a few students opt for the subject. However, unless more students, including girls, are encouraged to opt for those subjects the shortage of women teachers will continue. The fact that these practices have been retained in the latest curriculum changes reflects the lack of a guiding vision based on notions of gender equality to guide policy planning. These practices perpetuate gender disadvantage and the school system becomes an agent of reinforcement rather than of change in the process.

## Conclusion

In this chapter we have argued that education policy initiatives remain divorced from broader visions of gender justice and social policy—partly on account of the continuing dominance of discourses of investment in female education, which rely on identifying thresholds for minimum public action. Although there are multiple discourses influenced by diverse actors in the education policy arena, these do not seem to translate into policies and practices that have an impact on female schooling in a way that reflects the reality of girls’ education today.

We make three specific points. First, we argue that, at a symbolic level, the continuing sway of the idea of the “educated person” purely in terms of human capital has resulted in mechanistic definitions of what people are assumed to gain from education. This, arguably, emphasizes elementary education investment over subsequent levels of education, reduces the focus on developing policies appropriate to girls and boys at different stages of the lifecycle and places issues of quality and equity at the fringes of policy action. Combined with institutional biases and the political challenges of promoting gender equality, claims for investment in women that continually emphasize women’s role in helping their families, communities and nations end up reinforcing the core messages of human capital.

In our attempt to map the operation of discourses and practices in the secondary schooling arena, we found that the neglect of secondary education for girls was reinforced at all levels, thus appearing to be a direct translation of assumptions related to human capital. However, we also argue that “gender” does not operate only in the symbolic arena and that symbolic discourses are not all-powerful. Discourses can and do get renegotiated in the realm of practice, driven by varied motivations and compulsions. State policies for equity, such as in the UP case, are often implemented through market-mediated processes. While we do not wish to suggest that this is the result of a linear process of

translation of a particular (albeit hegemonic) policy discourse at different levels of policy decision making and execution, our case study has shown how political actors at the local level can subvert policies enacted in favour of women, resulting in the dilution of state commitments to gender equality, even if these were weak at the outset.

In the case of the policy enacted in UP to encourage female secondary schooling, we argue that this was weak to start with because it omitted to build up the demand side of girls' secondary schooling, resulting in a low uptake of the schools made available. The neglect of a focus on the demand for girls' schooling also meant that when the policy was reversed, through the actions of private providers, girls and parents affected by this move had barely any voice to challenge the change in policy. This leads us to argue strongly for the active role of states, even where private providers are in play, not just to subsidize the costs of schooling, but also to build up demand to ensure that education provision is seen as a matter of right and not a privilege to be bestowed and then taken away.

Our third and final point refers to the issue of the outcomes of policy. Given the emphasis on gender parity in secondary education as a Millennium Development Goal (MDG) and an Education For All (EFA) target, as well as the emphasis on gender equality in the EFA goals, the issue of gender and education cannot rest at the level of grand policy pronouncements on the importance of investment in women. This point has global relevance, but here we speak to the Indian context. While elementary education is finally getting the impetus it has been promised for decades, care has to be taken that the policy directions followed for this subsector do not have negative implications for the subsector that follows. If all schools are not improved in terms of their quality, transition to secondary schools in terms of access of the poorest and of girls will continue to be difficult to achieve. This fact, combined with the neglect of the secondary subsector in terms of providing girl-friendly single-sex schools that are relatively cost-free, will mean that girls are pushed out of education at a time when they need resources to develop the capacities, skills and aptitudes that will support their transition to adulthood.

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## Chapter 6

# **Mothers at the Service of the New Poverty Agenda: The PROGRESA/Oportunidades Programme in Mexico<sup>1</sup>**

*Maxine Molyneux<sup>2</sup>*

(2006)

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In Latin America as elsewhere in the world, gender bias and masculine prerogative have prevailed in social policy as in social life more broadly, with entitlements resting on culturally sanctioned and deeply rooted notions of gender difference and patriarchal authority. These have generally accorded with idealized assumptions about the asymmetric social positions occupied by the sexes with male breadwinners and female mother-dependants receiving benefits according to these normative social roles. Such assumptions have proved remarkably universal and enduring even where, as in Latin America, gender divisions have been modified by women's mass entry into the labour force and by equal rights legislation.

This chapter considers the changes and continuities in social policy provision in Latin America through a focus on the ways that women, in particular mothers, are positioned within the new anti-poverty programmes that have followed structural reform. It examines a flagship anti-poverty programme known as Oportunidades (Opportunities) established in Mexico at the end of the last decade,<sup>3</sup> which is seen by some commentators

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<sup>1</sup> Originally published as chapter 1 in *Gender and Social Policy in a Global Context: Uncovering the Gendered Structure of "the Social"*, edited by Shahra Razavi and Shirren Hassim (UNRISD and Palgrave Macmillan 2006); it had been extracted from a comparative research paper entitled *Change and Continuity in Social Protection in Latin America: Mothers at the Service of the State?*. UNRISD is grateful to Palgrave Macmillan for permission to reproduce this work here.

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<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing, Maxine Molyneux was Professor of Sociology at the Institute for the Study of the Americas, University of London.

<sup>3</sup> The analysis draws on conversations with Oportunidades Director Rogelio Gómez Hermosillo and Concepción Stepa, Director of Planning and Evaluation, as well as on field visits to Huachinango, San Miguel de Tenango and Zacatlán de las Manzanas in July 2005.

as a quintessentially neoliberal programme, embodying many of the main ideas of the “New Poverty Agenda”.<sup>4</sup> Oportunidades represents a novel combination of earlier social policy approaches with the contractarian, co-responsibility models associated with new approaches to social welfare and poverty relief. This chapter is in two main parts: the first provides the background context for the emergence of the new approaches to poverty; the second describes and critically examines the Mexican programme’s selective construction of social need.

## Social Policy in Latin America prior to the Reforms

In Latin America, low tax revenues and weak commitments to redistributive policies ruled out the development of effective, universal welfare systems. Only five countries—Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba and Uruguay<sup>5</sup>—developed a form of welfare state and, with the exception of Cuba, none achieved universality of entitlement or coverage.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, from the late nineteenth century, some forms of social provision began to evolve, if to widely different degrees. These were principally concentrated on the education and health sectors and where Bismarckian models were influential, as in Chile and Mexico, state pension schemes—along with other forms of social insurance for privileged (predominantly masculine) sectors of the labour and armed forces—accompanied the process of state formation.

From the first decade of the twentieth century social rights increased as a result of successful demands by organized labour and socialist parties for social reform, with an incremental assumption of social responsibility by governments. In the 1920s and 1930s “improving the ‘race’” in order to secure the conditions for development and head off threats of disorder became the leitmotif of the social reform and eugenics movements. Many women were among the promoters of “social hygiene” and its derivative—the science of *puericultura* (child development). They energetically supported policy and legal changes that were maternalist in orientation, demanding benefits and services for mothers and children. Mothers were among the first to be recognized as social policy claimants whether as married women or as “unfortunates”, that is, impoverished single mothers. However, it was often stated in the discussion of these provisions that it was primarily in the interest of their *children* that women might receive benefits of a financial, educational or medical kind. In other words it was in the construction of children’s needs that their mothers received entitlements, that is, in order to better fulfil their maternal responsibilities.

The era of nationalist state-centred development under corporatist populism was inaugurated by the crisis of 1929, but was more securely established in the post-war period. It brought some expansion in entitlements, notably for organized labour, the natural constituency of corporatist regimes and a relatively privileged sector for long afterward. Social rights correspondingly expanded in Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Mexico,

<sup>4</sup> This term was first used by the World Bank, but it has acquired a wider currency since.

<sup>5</sup> Colombia is a possible sixth according to some analysts. For overviews and analysis of Latin American social policy see, inter alia, Abel and Lewis 1993, 2002; Abel 1996; Mesa-Lago 1994; Haagh and Helgo 2002; and Tulchin and Garland 2000.

<sup>6</sup> It is significant that this group includes a socialist (Cuba), a market (Chile) and a mixed economy (Costa Rica) model of welfare. See Mesa-Lago et al. 2000 for elaboration of these comparative observations.

among others, and even as populist corporatism waned the technocratic developmentalism that replaced it continued to expand the social sector.

By the end of the 1960s all but the poorest states had established the main planks of social welfare—if at times in skeletal form. Health and education were publicly funded and social insurance systems covered some categories of formal-sector workers. Regional policies were now influenced by the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) or *cepalista*<sup>7</sup> guidelines, which drew on human capital theory to anchor social policy more firmly in a discourse of development priorities, as Latin American states presided over a rapid expansion of literacy programmes and primary education. At this time, too, the “basic needs” approach was gaining support, leading to some greater attention to “subsistence rights”<sup>8</sup> through the provision of food to the poor, sanitary works, potable water and affordable housing. Positive growth rates, rapid urbanization and social mobilization all caused Latin American states, irrespective of political inclination, to embark on programmes to meet rising social demands and expectations. These decades saw Latin America leading the developing countries in terms of social expenditure and social coverage. There was a corresponding improvement in human development indicators as life expectancy steadily increased and infant mortality declined, to place Latin America at the top of the developing regions by 1980 (Filgueira and Filgueira 2002).

While *cepalista* developmentalism was associated with universalist principles and, despite the expansion of social provision from the 1960s, most of the region still suffered from poor and skewed coverage and low-quality services, social policy provision in Latin America remained unevenly distributed between the richer and poorer states and, within these, between rural and urban populations, as well as across sectors.<sup>9</sup> The state sector was often underfunded, but was all too often also blighted by poor administration, with governments reactive to problems as they arose and susceptible to interest groups’ political demand making. Entitlements remained for the most part tied to formal employment with pensions available only to a minority of workers, with some insurance schemes for disability, unemployment and maternity. These arrangements did not cover the rural sector or the large proportion (sometimes as much as 40 per cent of the active population) that was in the informal sector or in domestic service—often the largest employer of urban women. In 1980 some 130 million people or 33 per cent of the total population of Latin America lived below the UN-defined poverty line. Since many of the poor were rural workers, or employed in the informal sector, they were unable to qualify for social insurance systems.

In the lower income countries such as Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Peru—and in some of the better-off states such as Brazil and Mexico—the situation was one of widespread poverty, sharp regional and ethnic inequalities, poor state provision, a weak entitlement framework, and minimal and far from efficient safety nets. Organizational and managerial deficiencies added to the problem in many countries, exemplified in multiple and overlapping welfare institutions, legal complexity, statistical inadequacies and lack of coordination between departments (Mesa-Lago 1994:76). For those living in and on the margins of poverty—that is, up to half the population in half of the countries

<sup>7</sup> The term “*cepalista*” derives from the acronym for ECLAC in Spanish, CEPAL (Comisión Económica para América Latina).

<sup>8</sup> See Eckstein and Wickham-Crowley 2003:19 on subsistence rights.

<sup>9</sup> Filgueira and Filgueira (2002) differentiate between countries characterized by “stratified universalism” (Argentina, Chile, Uruguay): “dual regimes” (Brazil, Mexico) and “exclusionary regimes” (Central America, except for Costa Rica).

of the region in the 1990s—the principal safety net was emergency relief (food aid, primary health) and family and kinship support, supplemented by the voluntary sector, comprising NGOs, church-based relief and charitable organizations.

## Gender and Social Policy

Contrary to some readings, social policy in Latin America was not gender blind but instead worked with gendered conceptions of social needs—ones that were familial, patriarchal and paternalistic. While women gained access to education and health, and entered the workforce, by broad consensus their primary duties lay within the family. Liberal citizenship might extend to women in the public realm, but in the private domain, a different order prevailed. Built into the earliest forms of social provision were assumptions of female dependency on a male breadwinner, which positioned women as under the protection of “their” men, whether husbands or fathers. Motherhood, too, was assumed to be a natural and inevitable destiny of women, one that brought them both rights and duties. Thus, in Latin America, women enjoyed some universal rights, but other rights and entitlements remained closely bound to the family, and were accessed by virtue of their status as wives and mothers. If, in the public realm of work, women employees gained recognition as mothers and were granted comparatively generous maternity leaves, in the private realm, on marriage, they lost certain citizens’ rights. Instead, like children, they gained a measure of protection, as those of dependent status. Widows of soldiers, professionals and some formal-sector workers were able on this basis to claim their deceased husbands’ pensions. Yet most working women were located in low-paid jobs, in unorganized sectors of employment, and in work that was considered supplementary to the male wage and that lacked social protection.

In Mexico, the cataclysmic upheavals of the revolution did not greatly alter this general picture. The constitution of 1917 and the civil code of 1928 accorded women legal equality and gave them some new rights, such as the right to divorce, but denied them full civil rights and political rights; universal female franchise was not granted until 1953, later than in most other Latin American states. Over time the law placed limits on men’s authority over their wives, but it was only in 1974 that the code making women responsible for the domestic sphere, and making abandoning the home a specifically female offence, was repealed (Varley 2000).

As elsewhere in Latin America, Mexican women workers and women’s organizations pressed for the regulation of their working hours, in order to protect them from overexploitation. They gained popular support for these demands in a context where there were widely expressed concerns that this was necessary in order to safeguard their “maternal functions”.<sup>10</sup> Paternalist sentiments were aroused by such claims, with women and children positioned in this discourse as requiring protection; many women protested that this was an excuse to deny them the right to equal work and well-paid jobs. Mexico’s “perfect dictatorship”, a blend of one-party rule and corporatism, combined revolutionary rhetoric, radical reform measures and social conservatism. Catholicism retained a hold over the population and, despite the secular disposition of the early revolutionaries, exerted a continuing influence over social policy and women’s rights. In

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<sup>10</sup> As early as 1906 in Uruguay bills were proposed to give rights to maternity leave, and legislation to restrict women’s working hours was first introduced in Argentina in 1905.



other ways too, women lost out in the process of post-revolutionary state formation. Corporatism established a political bond between the worker and the ruling party, ensuring the loyalty of the more powerful sectors of organized labour. Male-dominated trade unions were the principal beneficiaries of corporatist social contracts that enrolled men in the service of the state as workers and patriots—their compliance secured through negotiated pacts over wages, working conditions and social security (Roseblatt 2000). Where women had acquired a significant presence in the workforce, they laboured in poorly paid, less-organized sectors. Not only were they marginal to the contractual negotiations of the corporatist state, but they also occupied an ambiguous place in wage negotiations since their very presence in the workforce could compromise the historic demand of organized labour for a “family wage”—one premised on female dependency and the presence in the family of the full-time housewife and mother.

Corporatist bargaining did however secure the passage of some welfare measures, but what evolved was a selective, predominantly urban system of welfare, with rural and indigenous women largely excluded from these and other entitlements. Despite the agrarian reform’s revolutionary momentum, women were more often than not denied rights to property in land, which through law or custom remained a male prerogative—thus revealing the gender bias as well as the limits of the ruling party’s inclusive pretensions. If women gained entitlements as workers, these too were not only restricted to a small section of the female population, but were also often unclaimable in practice.<sup>11</sup> What little social protection was available to women was more likely to be accessed through marriage and family law, which specified that it was a husband’s duty to provide for his wife and children, and afforded women conjugal property rights.

While there occurred some limited individuation of women’s rights from the family as a result of reforms spearheaded by feminist movements, these general features of women’s social rights endured in Latin America. The restricted reach and scope of social policy, the poor quality and difficulty of accessing many of the services and benefits, meant that most low-income women could not and did not look to the state for much in the way of support on their own behalf. They might be fortunate enough to attain some minimum provision in education and health, and some support for their children, but individual entitlements such as income support and pensions were distant dreams for the majority. Security, such as it was, came from paid work where it could be found, from marriage, kin and community, and from the church.

## **Reforming the Social Sector**

The fragility and inefficiency of the social security systems prevailing across much of Latin America were features that were sharply accentuated by the broader socioeconomic trends that set in from the mid-1970s. The oil shocks, the debt crisis and subsequent recession of the 1980s combined with demographic pressures—and in much of the region with political conflict—to erode the social sector at precisely the moment when its expansion was most needed. This was a period that saw more women entering the labour force, while households sought to cut consumption, substituting market-

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<sup>11</sup> Barriers to claim making included administrative obstruction, low female educational attainment and ignorance of rights, and for indigenous women the lack of an identity card would be sufficient to bar them from their entitlements.

purchased goods and services with reproductive labour, largely provided by women (González de la Rocha 1994).

The human and social costs of the first phase of the structural reforms helped to revive longstanding debates over social sector reform, which now took place both within the region and in international development policy arenas. Cornia et al.'s (1987) UNICEF study, *Adjustment with a Human Face*, is widely acknowledged as a “wake up call” to international agencies to pay attention to the social costs of adjustment, but it was also important for the policy recommendations that it made. While presaging future policies, these recommendations also confirmed trends that were already under way; these included more targeting as a means to enhance the redistributive role of the state, employment-creating labour-intensive public work schemes, subsidies of certain items and, crucially, for the scope of social policy to be widened during times of adjustment.

These ideas were already achieving wide acceptance in development institutions, but would take time, political will and resources to implement across the region. Poverty was beginning to be acknowledged as a more enduring phenomenon than initially supposed. If, as many argued, it was not transitional but a structural effect of the New Economic Model, it would require closer attention to social assistance, with anti-poverty measures and state programmes that were more extensive in scope than Emergency Social Funds had allowed. By the end of the 1980s many governments and international development agencies accepted that there was an urgent need to address the “social deficit” if the neoliberal reforms were not to be violently rejected by the populations that had suffered so harshly from them. There was also broad agreement that if the social sector was to be more efficient it had to be brought into closer alignment with the market and with trends elsewhere toward pluralizing service delivery. A new approach to social policy, in which poverty was a crucial element, was evolving.

The central features of the new social policies as they evolved from the mid-1970s conform to general descriptions of neoliberal policy assumptions, containing as they do the familiar elements of targeting, privatization, multi-tierism and pluralization of service providers, along with a greater reliance on the market for poverty relief, most evidently in micro-credit programmes. But the way these elements were interpreted and incorporated into social policy reflected not only broader shifts within international development policy but also specific regional developments. “Neoliberalism” in Latin America passed through at least two main phases. The first, from the 1970s, generally seen as the period of “high neoliberalism”, coincided with the policies of structural adjustment and stabilization adopted in the debt crisis. These were the policies that were dubbed “market fundamentalism” when governments, often under conditionalities imposed by the international financial institutions, sharply decreased the realm of state action through privatization, imposed tight fiscal controls, liberalized capital accounts, and opened up their economies.

Since then, there has been some revision of these policies, with results summed up as “the post-Washington consensus”, sometimes hailed as “the end of neoliberalism”.<sup>12</sup> The original adjustment package was modified in three ways that concern us here: the state was partially rehabilitated in development policy and planning, its role described as “facilitator” by the World Bank and its efficiency to be enhanced through good governance reforms; there was a clear recognition by the international financial

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<sup>12</sup> By 2005 the talk was of the “post-post-Washington non-consensus” reflecting the greater pluralization of approaches to development in Latin America and in policy circles.

institutions (IFIs) and by Latin American governments that the social deficit had to be addressed, so social policy was returned to the regional agenda; and poverty relief became a central component of social policy. If in the 1980s policy attention focused on “getting the economy right”, in the 1990s there were attempts to attend to the hitherto neglected social realm and to build appropriate institutions. Significant though these policy shifts might be, they did not greatly alter the broader outline of macroeconomic policy; governments remained committed to fiscal discipline and market-led growth.

### **The New Social Policy Materializes**

As Brock et al. (2001) argue, the evolution of development policy is not usefully seen as following a unilinear dynamic; the social policies and development rhetorics that accompanied the post-adjustment phase are better described as “hybridized” and seen as the result of a complex dynamic of power and agency, involving a wider range of actors, interest groups and discourse coalitions than top-down accounts usually allow. This is particularly true of social policy, which is less subject to influence by IFIs than some other areas of policy, as it has to be approved by parliaments as well as by interest groups such as trade unions.

In Latin America by the early 1990s, reforms and policies affecting the social sector were being developed, some of which had first been applied experimentally from the 1970s, while others were new. In the latter category were more decentralized health and education provision, and the privatization of pensions; in the former, a greater emphasis on participatory mechanisms in the delivery of social welfare. All were intended to increase efficiency, accountability and quality (Grindle 2000). As poverty moved up the scale of international priorities, 1990 saw the launch of the World Bank’s New Poverty Agenda and toward the end of the decade the Millennium Development Goals committed governments to halving extreme poverty and hunger between 2000 and 2015.

Development policy analysts acknowledge that the ideas being advanced at this time marked a significant departure from the structural adjustment objectives pursued during the first phase of the reforms (Lipton and Maxwell 1992:1). Among the main changes were the importance of civil society and an emphasis on certain concepts that became central to the New Poverty Agenda—ones that were not novel in themselves but perhaps were so in combination. These were the principles of participation, empowerment and co-responsibility.

Participation is the least novel of the three but it moved from the margins of development practice in the 1970s to form part of mainstream thinking in the 1990s. Its combination of ethical (democratic) principle with efficiency arguments gave it a wide appeal, seeming to trump bureaucratic centralism on both counts. A wide range of participatory programmes were established, following the model of demand-led assistance first introduced in the Emergency Social Funds, which were later renamed Social Investment Funds and established on a more permanent basis. Decentralization, too, has proceeded in tandem with novel forms of participatory policy forums. From a broader societal perspective, participation was also argued to tackle the condition of social exclusion that frequently attends poverty and deprivation and is seen as central to, if not

synonymous with, the creation and maintenance of social capital—itsself a policy concern of the 1990s.<sup>13</sup>

Empowerment—like participation with which it is linked (since participation is one of the means to secure empowerment)—moved into mainstream development practice in the 1980s. Widely used in the practice of women’s organizations and by NGOs, it has generally been understood as a process of transformation involving both the acquisition of capabilities and changes in subjectivity that enable agency to be exercised. Empowering the poor and the disadvantaged should result in their gaining more voice and presence in decision-making arenas that affect their lives and in developing the capabilities to enable them to escape poverty. In Latin America support for such “empowerment approaches” built on the critique of traditional philanthropy that lived on “assistentialist” policies and saw “beneficiaries” as passive recipients of charity. Instead, the new policies situate “users” as “stakeholders”—with interests and responsibilities—who are “participants in the policy process”. They are no longer “beneficiaries” or “clients of the state” but empowered, active citizens capable of formulating their own needs and engaging in the setting of priorities and the implementation of projects, whether community development schemes, health and housing or micro-credit enterprises. As the capabilities approach has gained wider acceptance in policy circles, empowerment has come to mean that the poor are to be trained and educated to prepare them for employment. Poverty “relief” must not be considered a short-term palliative but, through incorporating elements that enhance the capacities and choices of the poor, they will be helped to develop the means to secure a route out of poverty. A further dimension is added to the conceptual basis of the new approach by “social risk management” as outlined in the 2000/2001 *World Development Report: Attacking Poverty* (World Bank 2000) wherein sustainable poverty alleviation entails measures to increase the security of the poor, through developing their capacity to “cope, mitigate or reduce” their risks. The risk-management approach has been adopted by a wide range of multilateral lending institutions.

Last—and again, closely related to these previous concepts—is the principle of beneficiary responsibility variously articulated in ideas of “co-management/responsibility” self-help or self-sufficiency, ideas that gained resonance in the 1980s when the state was identified as a major cause of development failure and accused of nurturing a “dependency culture”. At the same time the World Bank, concerned with cost-sharing and efficiency, formulated policies in which the no-longer-passive recipients of state handouts became active participants in meeting the costs of development. The growth of cost recovery, co-financing and co-management schemes—along with community participation and voluntary work—became a means to promote self-help in development and welfare projects. As states moved toward targeted assistance programmes, attention focused on how the poor could be encouraged to “help themselves”. This idea informed a range of policies—from giving economic assistance (as in the case of micro-credit) to providing basic education in nutrition and health care. These latter were designed, as in the earlier “social hygiene” movements of the 1920s and 1930s, to “modernize and civilize” the poor, but also to equip them with the attitudinal wherewithal to manage their own destinies, “free” of state dependency but subordinated to the discipline of the market (Rose and Miller 1992).

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<sup>13</sup> But one that was singularly gender blind. For a critical analysis, see Molyneux 2002.

## Latin America's New Social Policy

In Latin America the novel features of this “post-Washington consensus” phase of policy evolution lay in the specific regional interpretation of its key elements. This was most evident in three areas: the changes in the locus and character of state activities; the rise of parallel institutions to assist in the delivery of social welfare; and the promotion of civil society partnership in development and poverty relief programmes. Learning how these elements combined with efforts to create a democratic politics in post-authoritarian Latin America and resonated with historic demands for reform is essential in understanding the ways in which social policy was refashioned in the changed circumstances of the 1990s.

The Latin American experience of post-adjustment policy making was marked by an ad hoc accommodation to the precepts of the New Economic Model, combining new and old policy elements, while at the same time generating some original trends and initiatives that entered the global debate on poverty relief. In practice, policies range along a spectrum from social liberal variants with universalist inclusionary principles to those based on targeted provision with a greater role for privatized services. Brazil, for example, introduced a universal public pension to which everyone over a certain age is entitled. Indeed the Brazilian Constitution of 1988 was the first to combine proposals for an alliance between state and civil society, with a commitment to universal social policies and raising total public expenditure, along with new institutional structures, such as management councils and public hearings, where state and civil society could “work together to ensure that priority setting matched the public and private interests and secure accountability in the definition and delivery of social policies” (Schattan P. Coelho et al. 2002). In all of these variants, the Latin American region has seen the establishment of a wide range of new agencies and institutional structures for providing access to social services. Government-sponsored poverty programmes have been established to complement the continuing work of Social Investment Funds, and consultative processes and institutions have been put in place at local and national levels. As elsewhere, the official policy discourses and forms of entitlement that are being created in Latin America tend to place more emphasis on individual responsibility, while social security is defined in official statements as no longer residing solely with the state. It now involves the “co-management of risk”—that is, the individual has to make responsible provision against risks (through education and employment); the family, too, must play its part (through better care); while the market (through private interests) and the community (through decentralization, “co-responsibility” and the voluntary sector) are all involved in the decentring of expectations of welfare from the state.

The specificity of the Latin American region stamped its mark not only on how these ideas would materialize in policy but also on how they would be received by citizens. In a context of widespread distrust of the state and weak social protection, the refiguring of state-society relations offered by the “new social policy” (NSP) received a mixed response—by no means all negative. The core ideas at least seemed to offer some potential for advancing much needed reforms, if social and political conditions allowed. Decentralization, “good governance”, accountability, participation and urgent attention to poverty resonated with the reform agendas of democratic parties, movements and civil society organizations that were working to democratize politics and society following years

of military rule.<sup>14</sup> From the 1980s, calls to “deepen” democracy and to address the “social deficit” of the adjustment years converged with some of the good governance and state reform agendas. The human rights movement in the 1990s was enjoying a particularly prominent international role, and this impacted on Latin America at a time of considerable receptivity of women’s and children’s rights and indigenous claims for recognition and justice (Molyneux and Lazar 2003). Women’s organizations of various kinds were particularly active in promoting women’s rights, working simultaneously within communities and at state level to advance reforms in the areas of violence against women, legal and political representation and reproductive rights. They also helped to establish and sustain popular health movements, leadership and legal literacy training for women throughout the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>15</sup>

Where was the state in this scenario? Analyses of neoliberal restructuring have documented the scaling down of entitlements and of governments’ commitments to universal provision showing the trend toward a greater reliance on the private and third sectors for welfare delivery. These trends have been seen as evidence of the shrinking of the state, its “hollowing out”, “evacuation”, even “disappearance”. Does this accurately describe what has occurred in Latin America? The evidence suggests a more complex picture, a less “zero sum” situation. There has undoubtedly occurred a decisive shift from the state-centric principles that previously governed social policy, but this has not gone along with the “evacuation of the state” from social provision. This widely held view of post-1980 reforms does not allow us to capture what is different about current social policy figurations of the state, or the substantial changes that the state itself has undergone during the decades of “neoliberal hegemony”. In Latin America social reproduction in the domains of health and educational provision remains by and large the responsibility of the state across a range of countries, despite decades of creeping privatization and underfunding. After the critical watershed years of the debt crisis when social expenditure per capita fell to unprecedented levels,<sup>16</sup> by 1991 it recovered the levels registered at the beginning of the 1980s, and in recent years social expenditure has generally risen across the region. While these figures must be treated with caution, the role of the state in public welfare remains significant.

The state itself however has undergone reform in this process, led by efforts to advance good-governance agendas designed to make state institutions more efficient and accountable and by democratic reform parties and movements. This has gone along with support for decentralization and deconcentration, with Latin America taking the lead in the 1990s as the region that advanced furthest down this path. Re-democratization involved a wave of constitutional reform across the region, and decentralization was one of the democratic principles incorporated in the new frameworks to redress a historic legacy of overcentralization. Across the Latin American region from the 1980s, states have been engaged in a process aimed at strengthening and reforming local government, while devolving a greater share of the budget to locally administered state agencies. This process of “municipalization” has brought the state back into the domain of welfare provision, albeit in a new guise. As we will see in the case of Mexico, poverty relief has engaged states, both central and local, in a wide range of programmes involving millions of dollars

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<sup>14</sup> See Jelin and Hershberg 1996 for further discussion.

<sup>15</sup> See Craske and Molyneux 2002 for case studies of women’s movement activism in the 1990s.

<sup>16</sup> In real terms social spending per capita declined by 10 per cent between 1982 and 1986. Even as it grew afterwards it remained 6 per cent below its 1980 level at the end of that decade and only recovered slowly in the 1990s (IDB 1996).

of public and international funding. None of this is to suggest that the decentralization process in Latin America has overcome distributive problems or secured adequate citizen representation. Devolved resources remain sparse and, without plans to tackle regional economic regeneration, decentralization has not generally produced a marked improvement in welfare coverage. Yet, while moribund, corrupt and clientelized states abound in the region, states are still central actors in the development and welfare domains. As Judith Tandler shows in the case of Ceara with a population of 40 million in the Brazilian north east, the state “is doing more” not less “and something quite different as well” (Tandler 1997:24).

These multiple changes in social welfare provision were bound to have consequences for the large numbers of female poor. In recent years female poverty, as distinct from the gender dimensions of poverty, acquired considerably more policy attention. If during the period of SAPs women were the invisible army that bore the costs of the adjustment to ensure household survival, the New Poverty Agenda appeared to render women more visible. From the later 1980s women’s poverty as well as their role in poverty relief programmes became increasingly evident to policy communities. Feminist advocacy and research into the gendered effects of adjustment played their part in securing this visibility: female poverty was a central theme of all the international women’s conferences and the Beijing Platform for Action (PFA) called for it to be addressed as a matter of urgency. The PFA proposed a number of priorities for assistance: the targeting of female-headed households, greater participation of women in decision making at community and other levels, and the extension of credit to low-income women were among them. The promotion of these ideas was also part of a broader effort by Latin American women’s organizations to incorporate a gender analysis into regional declarations and government policies. NSP therefore evolved during the high point of global feminism and yet, as we shall see, its practical realization often meant that it existed in tension with the latter’s emphasis on equality.

However, while the current focus on poverty has its novel features, it is also marked by a continuum with earlier women and development approaches that saw “integrating women” as a way to secure broader development objectives, while failing to tackle underlying causes of gender inequality. If this is a general rule that all too often applies today, it is nonetheless important to emphasize the considerable diversity in the conception and implementation of these new programmes. As we will see, the objectives of these programmes determine how women will be involved and how they are affected. To illustrate this point, we now turn to consider the Mexican anti-poverty programme, PROGRESA/Oportunidades.

## **PROGRESA/Oportunidades**

Mexico is an upper-middle-income country and one of the most industrialized in Latin America, but poverty is estimated to afflict half the population, with a fifth in extreme poverty, due to its highly skewed income distribution.<sup>17</sup> Social divisions inherited from the colonial period and deepened through urban bias exist along regional, ethnic and

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<sup>17</sup> ECLAC and the Mexican government’s estimates broadly agree that 45 per cent of the population lives under conditions of poverty while other estimates put the figure as high as 61 per cent in poverty and 26.5 per cent (25 million) in extreme poverty (Urquidí in Middlebrook and Zepeda 2003). The top 20 per cent accounted for 59.3 per cent of income in 1989; the bottom 20 per cent for 3.9 (Grindle 2000:20).

gender lines, with 44 per cent of indigenous Mexicans found in the poorest income quintile. Mexico's state welfare system is based on formal employment but coverage is restricted to just 55 per cent of the population due to the character of its labour market (Laurell 2003:324). Up to half of the economically active population depends upon the informal sector for its income, and has access to few benefits. Moreover the size of the informal sector means that Mexico collects only 11 per cent of GDP in tax—well below the average for Latin America (which is 18 per cent) and below that of relatively low-tax countries such as the United States.<sup>18</sup>

The election of Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) leader Vicente Fox in 2000 ended 71 years of one-party rule by the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), and was accompanied by efforts to reform existing institutions along more democratic and accountable lines. Fox pledged to make social justice a priority of his government, recognizing that poverty was a “multidimensional phenomenon”, and raising social expenditure by an average of almost 10 per cent per annum. The main poverty relief programme directed at those in extreme poverty, PROGRESA was modified and relaunched in 2002 under the name Programa Desarrollo Humano Oportunidades, known today as Oportunidades. The programme's coverage, formerly restricted to the rural poor, was extended to include urban and semi urban areas,<sup>19</sup> and the number of those inscribed in the programme was expanded from 2.6 million families (in 1999), the equivalent of 40 per cent of all rural families (Rocha Menocal 2001:520), to 4.2 million families in 2002 (of which 2.9 were rural) (González de la Rocha 2003:14). By 2005 it covered five million households with an estimated 25 million beneficiaries.

Oportunidades is one of the most extensive programmes of its kind in Latin America. It is also considered to be the most successfully developed example of the region's NSP-inspired anti-poverty programmes.<sup>20</sup> It has been judged to be particularly effective in meeting its goals, and this is attributed to an unusually high degree of presidential support and interministerial collaboration along with an annual budget (in 2004) of 25 billion pesos and a recent loan of US\$1 billion from the IDB. An undoubted strength of the programme is that it is subject to regular evaluations, including some by outside bodies, and has been responsive to suggestions for improvements and modifications. Oportunidades is a targeted cash transfer programme that attempts to combine short- and long-term objectives of sustainable poverty reduction, as advanced by the social risk-management approach. As noted earlier, this approach aims to tackle poverty through helping the poor to “cope, mitigate or reduce” their risk of falling into or being trapped in poverty. Oportunidades aims to improve human development by

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<sup>18</sup> In 1997 social expenditure accounted for 7.8 per cent of GDP; it has risen slightly since.

<sup>19</sup> PROGRESA was preceded by PRONASOL, also known as Solidarity, Mexico's first large-scale anti-poverty programme. Established in 1988, its conception of poverty relief was quite different from PROGRESA and had party political objectives. It was designed by the Salinas administration to offset the political consequences of the adjustment years and revive the flagging political support of the PRI. According to Molinar and Weldon (1994), PRONASOL's regional priorities were developed with three aims in mind: to reward PRI loyalists, to reconvert PRD (Partido de la Revolución Democrática) supporters and to punish PAN supporters (Rocha Menocal 2001:524). Such manoeuvres delivered the expected returns to the ruling party, but the programme was discredited. When Zedillo assumed the presidency in 1994, he replaced PRONASOL with PROGRESA claiming that his new anti-poverty programme did not have a political agenda (Rocha Menocal 2001:513). Although some political bias continued, it was much reduced; the PRI lost the 2000 elections to the opposition PAN party. Oportunidades has since sought to distance itself from this record of political clientelism, with a public campaign message stating that social protection is a right and allegiance is not due to any political party.

<sup>20</sup> Some observers have preferred to ignore the Mexican contribution to the development of the programme and have seen it as originating with the World Bank, as it appears to be in sympathy with its broader recommendations. PROGRESA was not imposed by the World Bank and was intended to run only on federal funds with no direct funding from the World Bank. Oportunidades is government-funded with loan support from the IDB, as above.



focusing on children's education, nutrition and health. It is based on the assumption that poor households do not invest enough in their human capital, and are thus caught in a vicious circle of intergenerational transmission of poverty with children dropping out of school and destined to suffer the long-term effects of deprivation.

Families selected for the programme are therefore helped, through cash transfers, with the financial and opportunity costs of having children in school. The transfers are primarily in the form of "scholarships" for children to attend school,<sup>21</sup> supplemented by additional cash to improve nutrition where required. The practical functioning of the programme centres on mothers as the key to securing improvements in the life chances of their children, born and unborn. It seeks to strengthen, through workshops and monitoring, the mothers' responsibilities for children's health and education and to improve the nutritional status of their children (and of themselves, if they are pregnant or breastfeeding). Secondary outcomes such as building the mothers' capacities, empowerment, citizen participation and strengthening community ties are part of the programme's goals, but how these are interpreted has varied over time and the quality of what is on offer under these headings depends upon local authorities and cooperating professionals.

Oportunidades' guiding principles are designed to differentiate it from assistentialist programmes through an emphasis on the participants' "active management" of their risk through "co-responsibility" (*cogestion*) or co-management. Responsibility for health and education is to be recognized as not only the government's but the whole of society's, and therefore should be assumed by the entire community. However, the responsibility of the "entire community" is perhaps better described as being devolved to mothers who are those designated as being primarily responsible for securing the programme's outcomes. Co-responsibility is formalized through a quasi-contractual understanding that, in return for the entitlements proffered by the programme, certain obligations are to be discharged by the two parties, that is, the programme and the participating mother. This conditional form of entitlement, although well established in other regions and emanating from the United States, is of more recent origin in Latin America but is being widely adopted. In this case the responsible participants (mothers) receive their stipend on condition that they fulfil the duties laid out by the programme managers: this involves taking children for regular health checks, meeting targets for ensuring their children's attendance at school, attending workshops on health and programme coordinators' meetings, and contributing a set number of hours of work to the community, typically for cleaning buildings or clearing rubbish. Failure to comply with the requirements can lead to being struck off the programme.

On the available evidence collected through regular evaluations, the programme has been largely successful on its own terms.<sup>22</sup> Its stipends have reduced household poverty and improved school attendance of children, as well as the health and nutritional levels of all those inscribed in the programme.<sup>23</sup> These are important gains, and are extensively

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<sup>21</sup> Monetary and educational grants are provided for all those under 22 years of age enrolled in school between the third grade of primary school and the third grade of high school.

<sup>22</sup> The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) website contains a number of evaluation reports on different aspects of PROGRESA/Oportunidades. See in particular Skoufias and McClafferty (2000), which covered the three years up until 1999, as a result of which the programme was extended to rural areas. The results of a qualitative evaluation carried out in six communities by Escobar Latapí and González de la Rocha were published in 2004 and are referred to here. Another large-scale evaluation is currently under way.

<sup>23</sup> Escobar Latapí and González de la Rocha's (2004) qualitative research confirmed Skoufias and McClafferty's (2000) findings that the largest positive impacts were on children in secondary school. The latter's survey finds a 10 per cent increase in enrolment for boys and 20 per cent for girls along with an overall narrowing of the gender gap in education, particularly in primary school.

discussed elsewhere. Here we will focus on some of the more contentious aspects of the programme as highlighted by the women participants in interviews and evaluations before considering the question of the programme's gender impacts.

As far as the design of the programme is concerned, there appear to be two main criticisms made by participants that raise some general issues of principle—the issue of targeting and that of co-responsibility. With regard to the first, one large-scale multisite assessment carried out by the World Bank and others<sup>24</sup> found that, while none of the women who participated in the programmes doubted that Oportunidades had helped them in their struggle against poverty, there were some criticisms of the way targeting was applied. Despite the rigour of the selection mechanisms, and despite the claim that the programme is intended to be seen as a way to “[access] a social right in a situation of social inequality” (Aguilar Rivero 2002:6), the targeting process attracted the strongest criticism from participants in some evaluation exercises. Along with a general sense that more information should be made available on the programme and on the means-testing mechanism itself, dissatisfaction was expressed over the selection process, which was felt to be arbitrary, excluding people whose needs were considered just as pressing as those included in the programme. Means-testing was felt to “generate a lack of trust, social divisions and feelings of envy and exclusion” among those not selected (González de la Rocha 2003:17). These are common problems faced by targeted social protection programmes in contexts where poverty is extensive and deep, although Oportunidades' coverage is more extensive than most programmes—a factor that has caused it to be dubbed “a near universal programme” by those in charge of it.

A second general complaint voiced by participants was that they felt “discriminated against” by its demands on their time. They believed that they were “treated badly or...were asked to do things in ways that offended their dignity” (Aguilar Rivero 2002:4). As they expressed it, because they were “paid by the government” they were expected to perform community work, such as cleaning schools and health centres, while others in the community did not.<sup>25</sup> In another evaluation women complained of being made to do “absurd” tasks just for the sake of keeping them occupied. The requirement to do community work had been incorporated into the earlier programme and was continued into the new post-PROGRESA design by the Fox administration, but following recommendations by evaluators the amount of work time contributed was reduced and it is still an issue under consideration.

In light of such findings it is not surprising that there was, among some communities, resistance to accepting the notion of “co-responsibility”. Rather, the requirements of the programme were seen in terms of “obligations” and participants felt that *genuine* co-responsibility would also oblige teachers to accept their “responsibility not to miss classes so much”. This “inequality of responsibility” made some participants resentful of the way they were expected to meet targets set for monitoring the health and education of their children and could be ejected from the programme for failing to do so. Why, they asked, should a teacher's salary not be reduced if they fail to turn up to teach, since mothers were fined for not meeting their targets? This latter point reflected a general criticism that there were few reliable mechanisms of accountability where complaints regarding the behaviour of officials or professionals could be processed; nor

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<sup>24</sup> Cited in Rivero 2002.

<sup>25</sup> In the PROGRESA programme such work involved on average 29 hours per month.

were the participants given an active role in the design, management and evaluation of the programme (González de la Rocha 2003). It is hard to square these findings with the view that the programme was intended to function as a way of exercising civil, political and social rights and as a means to achieve full citizenship (Aguilar Rivero 2002).<sup>26</sup>

## Gender Relations: Now You See Them, Now You Don't

One of the claims made by Oportunidades programme managers is that it has helped to empower the mothers and daughters who are its beneficiaries. It is to this claim that we now turn. As far as gender is concerned it is clear that gender is not only incorporated into but is central to the management and design of the Oportunidades programme. There are four main aspects to this gender sensitivity: first, the programme was one of the earliest in Latin America to give the financial transfers (and the principal responsibilities associated with them) to the female head of participating households; second, the transfers associated with children's school attendance involved an element of affirmative action: stipends were 10 per cent higher for girls than for boys at the onset of secondary school, which is when the risk of female drop-out is highest;<sup>27</sup> and third, the programme's health care benefits for children were supplemented by a scheme that monitors the health of, and provides support for, pregnant and breastfeeding mothers, and children under two years of age. The fourth aspect of the project design that displays gender sensitivity is the goal to promote the leadership and citizenship of the women subscribed. These goals represent a combination of equality measures (for the girls) and maternalist measures for their mothers, but with what outcomes and gender impacts?

There is a paucity of detailed evidence on this question and it is far from sufficient to make an accurate estimate.<sup>28</sup> Most information that is available comes from a large-scale survey by Adato et al. (2000) and qualitative research by Escobar Latapí and González de la Rocha (2004). These allow certain general points to be established. First, as is well known, improving the educational opportunities for girls has strong potential to enhance their self-esteem and life chances, while at the same time sending a message to households and to communities that girls are "worth investing in". Second, stipends paid directly to mothers are widely accepted to benefit their households through more equitable redistribution, but in giving women direct control over cash resources, their standing in their communities as well as their leverage *within* the household can be enhanced. The evidence from evaluations of the Mexican programme confirms these trends—although, as one evaluation noted, while the mothers enjoyed some increased autonomy, this did not necessarily translate into empowerment, since the latter depended on more factors than control over a small money income (Escobar Latapí and González de la Rocha 2004). Women did however appear to feel that their self-esteem was enhanced as a result of the stipends (Escobar Latapí and González de la Rocha 2004). They also appreciated the programme's education and training projects (including health and community leadership) where these were well organized, but they wanted more access to education and training (Adato et al. 2000).

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<sup>26</sup> Since the programme strives to separate social entitlements from political clientelism, this is another sense in which citizenship is understood.

<sup>27</sup> Grants rise with the age of the child and the sex difference in the grant starts with secondary school, which is normally when girls drop out. In the third year of secondary school monthly grants are about US\$58 for boys and US\$66 for girls.

<sup>28</sup> An audit of the gender effects of the programme is currently under discussion.

More research is needed into the gender impacts of the programme so as to establish whether it is producing a redistribution of power and status within households and, if so, to explain what effects this status reordering has on household livelihoods and well-being. Transfers paid directly to women have the potential to generate conflict if men feel that they are entitled to control money resources and resent any undermining of their authority. However, existing data indicate that no strong relationship has been found linking the programme and the incidence of violence in the home.<sup>29</sup>

However, these positive developments might need to be qualified in the context of more critical appraisals. While those available refer to the earlier years of the programme, they indicate issues that arose—some of which are ongoing—as well as the reflexive response of the programme to these problems. One evaluation of Oportunidades by the Red de Promotoras y Asesoras Rurales (Network of Rural Promoters and Assessors) concluded that there was no significant improvement in women's position in their families,<sup>30</sup> the stipend was insufficient to overcome poverty, and the programme did not generate employment opportunities for school-leavers that would enable the cycle of poverty to be overcome.<sup>31</sup> Escobar Latapí and González de la Rocha (2004) further noted that the programme did not take sufficient account of women's income generating and other activities such as collective community work (*faenas*) and that as a consequence women could be overloaded with competing demands on their time.

In sum, Oportunidades has several positive features as a new human development programme beyond its successes with regard to improving children's health and life chances. It has, over time, expanded its coverage and sought to respond to some of the gaps in its provision, taking account of evaluations in the modifications of its programme. It has also made some headway in detaching poverty relief from political patronage—although much still remains to be achieved. It has also helped low-income households to cope financially with the demands of school-age children. It has remained, however, in essence a maternalist programme in that it aims to fortify and normalize the responsibilities of motherhood as a way to improve the life chances of children. Its human development rationale accurately describes the programme's goals as far as children are concerned, but its combined focus on mothering and reproductive health has made it less likely to develop a more differentiated set of capacities for the mothers. In effect Oportunidades creates a dependency on a subsidy that confirms mothering as women's primary social role—one that may enhance their social status and self-respect, but that nonetheless puts them at risk of remaining in poverty for the rest of their lives.

## Female Altruism at the Service of the State?

Oportunidades exemplifies the maternalism at the heart of many of the new anti-poverty programmes being established in Latin America, and its organizational principles raise

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<sup>29</sup> This is clearly contentious and requires further in-depth research. According to Adato et al. (2000) and my own interviews with specialists in gender and poverty, there has been considerable evidence of violence against women over control of the stipend in some regions (author's interview, Oaxaca, July 2005).

<sup>30</sup> Based on responses from 309 beneficiaries and 60 professionals in eight communities.

<sup>31</sup> A new component has been added to the programme since these findings—"Jovenes con Oportunidades", which provides youth training and work experience. However on a field visit young people interviewed saw themselves as having no future in their localities and dreamt of migrating. Without attention to rural livelihoods, Oportunidades risks educating the young for the US labour market.

some important questions for gender analysis. Feminist theory and practice have suggested that if gender equality is to be tackled in development and welfare programmes, these must have some potential to empower women and enhance their capabilities in ways that enable them to challenge relations of inequality and subordination and at the same time provide some scope for female economic autonomy. The new anti-poverty programmes may successfully identify some unmet needs within poor households and communities, but attending to the needs of the women (the mothers) who are central to the functioning of these programmes is not their explicit aim, any more than gender equality is their key objective. The social construction of need in these programmes is child-centred, as is their overall organization. Women are incorporated into programme design (that is, they are visible) but in a way that depends upon the gender divide for its success. Thus, even as women might be empowered within these structures (through managing the subsidy), such programmes in effect reinforce the social divisions through which gender asymmetries are reproduced.

In the first place they depend upon women fulfilling their “traditional” social roles and responsibilities. Oportunidades does so by basing its programme on normatively ascribed maternal responsibilities, in effect making transfers conditional on “good motherhood”. Men are not incorporated in any serious way, and no effort is made to promote the principle that men and women might share responsibility for meeting project goals. These programmes unambiguously rest on normative assumptions concerning “women’s roles” so that the work women undertake in ensuring that children’s needs are met is taken for granted as something that mothers “do”. The social relations of reproduction therefore remain unproblematized and the work performed easily naturalized.

Latin American cultural constructions of femininity are strongly identified with motherhood, and serving the needs of children and household is generally considered a primary maternal responsibility. Motherhood is often offered as the explanation for political or civic activism, and allied with moral virtue, altruism and self-sacrifice. It is likewise assumed by programme managers and participants alike that any actions that improve the well-being of children are not, as Bradshaw and Quirós Viquez express it, a “burden” for women, and any “costs” they bear are “simply part of the mothering role” (2003). If femininity is closely bound up with an affective investment in a self-sacrificing or altruistic motherhood, the ideological site for contesting the demands of maternalist programmes is not one that is easily occupied. Beneficiaries who miss a clinic appointment or a workshop because they are working, lay themselves open to the charge of being “bad mothers” who do not care for their children (Bradshaw and Quirós Viquez 2003).

The Mexican programme seeks even greater commitment from mothers through the regulation of their domestic responsibilities, situating them as the principal managers of their families’ needs. This does however involve some status reordering in the family in favour of mothers but *within* the traditional division of labour. While much is said about the “individuation of the social” in regard to neoliberal policies, this does not apply to the women in these programmes who are bound ever more securely to the family. If there is a new element beyond the purely technical administration of the project, it is that which is introduced by some (albeit limited) sensitivity on the part of the designers to issues of gender equality—at least in the case of the girl children, if far less so in the case of their mothers. One must conclude that gender equity considerations had some influence on the design of these programmes in recent years—sometimes as a result of feminist

advocacy through NGOs, sometimes as a result of the shift in public and professional attitudes occasioned by the spread of feminist ideas.

It remains the case that the women in such programmes are primarily positioned as a means to secure programme objectives; they are a *conduit of policy*, in the sense that resources channelled through them are expected to translate into greater improvements in the well-being of children and the family as a whole.<sup>32</sup> Such benefits as are derived by the mothers themselves as a result of participation in the programme are a by-product of servicing the needs of others. This is compounded by the fact that there is little in the design of the programmes that advances women's economic autonomy or security. Training for the job market is limited or non-existent, and there is scant, if any, childcare provision for those women who want or need it because they work, train or study. Poor women are often involved in income-generating activities that, while precarious, may leave them without much disposable time or flexibility.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, while rarely acknowledged in the case of women, participation in anti-poverty programmes can have *negative* consequences in incurring opportunity costs by preventing or restricting women's freedom to engage in paid work (Bradshaw and Linneker 2003). In the Oportunidades programme the assumption that mothers were available to carry out "their" stipulated duties in respect of their children takes no account of the fact that there was, according to one evaluation, an "increasing dependency" on women's earnings, even though these were often meagre (Escobar Latapí and González de la Rocha 2004).

This is not to deny that many women might choose not to work and might not perceive the programme's demands as anything other than helpful in relieving some of the pressure on them to obtain paid work—especially if little is available to them. However, given the importance of women's lifelong economic precariousness and their need to secure cash incomes, the relative lack of attention to this issue is striking.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusions

Women have much to contribute to anti-poverty programmes. Their gendered assets, dispositions and skills, their inclination toward involvement in household survival and at community level, and their precarious relationship to the wage economy, all help to make them appear a peculiarly suitable ally of anti-poverty programmes. This is not least because they also represent an army of voluntary labour and can serve as potential generators or guardians of social capital. This "suitability" can be understood as arising from the positive and negative aspects of the gendered relations of poverty. If poverty is a multidimensional condition involving deprivation and exclusion, then, on the basis of indicators such as those developed in the capabilities approach, women, lacking assets and with fewer capabilities, might be considered to be more subject to deprivation and exclusion than men. Yet, if this is often so, not only is well-being a question of material goods but it also involves self respect, dignity, belonging and participation, and it may be the case that even disadvantaged women might have more access to forms of social inclusion and well-being than men in similar material circumstances. Women are

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<sup>32</sup> IDB/BID data cited in Bradshaw and Quirós Viquez 2003.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Gideon 2002 on Chile, and Bradshaw 2002 on Nicaragua.

<sup>34</sup> A pilot project undertaken by BID is working with mothers to engage in productive activity; this is clearly a step forward and signals an awareness of this shortcoming.

vulnerable economically, chiefly because their labour-market situation is precarious and interrupted by periods of childbearing and the demands of caregiving. They often lead busy lives, engaged as they are in the informal and care economies, both private and public, typically performing unpaid or poorly paid work. Yet they can, and frequently do, gain satisfaction, self-esteem, recognition and respect from motherhood and from activities that constitute a kind of “informal citizenship” that takes their domestic activities from the isolation of the family to public spaces, with some (albeit variable) development of their capacities.

These gendered assets and dispositions are being increasingly recognized by the international development agencies, but so far this has not brought significant material benefits to the women involved. The costs many women bear through juggling these multiple responsibilities in terms of weak labour-market links, lack of support for care work and long-term security are rarely taken into account. Prevailing policy assumptions still tend to naturalize women’s “roles” and seek to make use of them and influence how they are developed and managed subjectively and situationally. Poverty relief is still treated all too often as a matter of an unproblematized social need, abstracted from the social relations that produce it. The classic assistentialist programmes that targeted women and children as high risk and in poverty were based on this view, and were commonly associated with paternalist notions of care and charity. They made little if any attempt to address the conditions that placed their beneficiaries in these circumstances and concentrated on short-term relief typically delivered in the form of food aid and primary health care. The ideas of the NSP try to go beyond this through participation, gender awareness, capacity building, and by “responsibilizing” the poor, yet in practice programmes still rely on outdated conceptions about women’s social roles that take little account of their differentiated needs. Programmes that give money or food to those in “vulnerable” positions and fail to strengthen households’ assets do little to reduce vulnerability (Bradshaw and Quirós Viquez 2003). If women are to be provided with an opportunity to redefine the terms of their inclusion in their societies and in their polities, the unequally valued forms of social participation for men and women that are inscribed within the public and private spheres, and that pervade the organization of care work, the public sphere, paid work and public institutional life need to be challenged rather than deepened. The radical challenge to social policy from an equality perspective is to deontologize “women’s roles” and to help reconstruct gender relations along more egalitarian lines in both the domestic and public spheres. Marginalizing men from these responsibilities is not in their overall interest any more than it is in children’s.

For women in poverty, current programmes appear to offer both risks and opportunities. Women are well placed to occupy a central role in the new poverty agendas, and the evidence shows that many women in Latin America experience well-being from participating in activities that are not tied to monetary reward. But such participation is always conditional on the participant’s support of the project, and on the gains, individual and collective, that it brings. Those involved in voluntary work may be happy to give their time and effort but they still need projects that enhance their capabilities through education or training, providing links to employment, advancing credit for successful projects that enable them to acquire their own assets. Above all, women need a reliable income source and sustainable routes out of poverty, ones that are at the same time more realistic and imaginative than the maternalist options that are currently in place. The limits of programmes like Oportunidades are evident not only in their selective approach to tackling social need but also in their narrow vision of how to

overcome poverty; stipends are no substitute for economic regeneration and without attention to the household livelihoods and long-term prospects of the poor, including women, such programmes, despite their good intentions, remain fundamentally trapped in “assistentialist” paradigms.

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## Chapter 7

# Governing Women or Enabling Women to Govern: Gender and the Good Governance Agenda<sup>1</sup>

Anne Marie Goetz<sup>2</sup>

(2008)

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Governance failures that afflict women differently than men include the neglect of women's needs by service providers, gender-biased rulings by justice personnel, corruption that takes the form of extortion of sexual favours and patterns of public resource allocation that prioritize responses to men's needs over women's. Frequently, these problems are traced to an inadequate *demand* from women for better services, for justice, for an end to impunity or for a gender-equitable distribution of public funds. But as more women move into public decision-making positions, and as women's movements become more assertive, it is clear that there is no lack of demand from women for better governance. The persistent failures of states to respond to women's needs, or to be held accountable for their actions from a women's rights perspective, expose profound gender biases in the *supply* of good governance for women. In other words, women in public office, passing new laws and designing policies to respond to women's needs, come up against a serious obstacle to effective implementation of new measures: low-capacity states unable to challenge vested interests in women's subordination. A gender perspective on governance shows that sometimes state

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<sup>2</sup> Anne Marie Goetz is Professor of Political Science at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, currently working as chief advisor to the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) on governance, peace and security. She is the author of five books on the subjects of gender and politics in developing countries, and on accountability reforms—the latest book, co-authored with Rob Jenkins, is *Reinventing Accountability; Making Democracy Work for Human Development* (Palgrave, 2005). Professor Goetz has engaged in a wide range of advisory work related to gender, democratization and governance, including direct advisory work for developing country governments, for multilateral economic institutions and bilateral donors, and for NGOs.

institutions and personnel internalize and reproduce gender biases, so that, far from enabling women to govern effectively, they actually “govern women”, in the sense of limiting their choices to the extent of reinforcing subordination. Accountability systems to detect and correct institutionalized patterns of gender bias are frequently weak, or else are not calibrated to condemn and prevent the neglect or exclusion of women. Are these gender-specific accountability and governance deficits an accident or oversight? Or do they represent profoundly gender-biased governance systems that are part of the subordination or patriarchal governance of women?

This chapter examines the challenge of building women’s political effectiveness not so much from the perspective of women’s agency, as is the case with most of the chapters in this book, but rather from the perspective of governance systems. This perspective is a necessary one, as so many women seeking to promote women’s rights in public office or in civil society find their progressive agendas blocked by the sheer mechanics of governance systems, by the fact that existing patterns of privilege and distorted resource distribution are not necessarily altered just because there are new participants with new ideas. No number of women in office will mitigate the ill effects on women of incompetent, unresponsive or downright subversive bureaucrats, corrupt judges or biased market-regulating mechanisms. Good governance is essential for the effective translation of progressive policies into implementation patterns that make a difference to women on the ground. But what is considered “good” about governance depends upon the actor promoting it. Good governance from a business perspective is not necessarily the kind of governance that ensures women’s participation or the responsiveness of the public sector to women’s needs. This chapter turns immediately to definitions of good governance. It then reviews the limitations of one of the most popular approaches to institutionalizing government responsiveness to women—national women’s machinery. It moves on to outline an approach to analysing governance failures from a gender perspective and to identify practical means of ensuring that incentive changes, performance measures and accountability reforms enable both the removal of gender biases and the empowerment of women to engage in authorizing effective state responses to their needs.

## **Governance and “Good” Governance**

What is wrong with governance—from the perspectives of women—in many countries? For many women, especially poor women, the way a country is governed may not be an immediate direct concern. Nearly all women’s lives are shaped most immediately by informal institutions—traditional authorities, clan or kin leaders, religious authorities—and by private-sector actors such as the local businesses or landlords in a position to offer employment or access to productive resources. The state of course shapes the extent to which these informal and private power holders influence women’s choices to the degree that state institutions limit private abuses of power and impose conformity with national or international human rights standards. Many states, however, have a limited reach in relation to significant informal and private authorities—this is a problem that contributes to poor quality governance. But even in contexts of reasonably well-consolidated states with reasonably effective governance, for many women, the state can be a source of abuse, not a protector of women’s rights. Police may sexually harass women or worse when women come to police stations to register cases of rape or domestic violence. Judges and lawyers may refuse to recognize abuses of women’s rights as crimes worthy of the

attention of the legal system. School teachers may sexually harass or rape girl students, yet pregnant girls are forced to quit school while their teachers are never prosecuted or punished for rape. Agricultural research may ignore women's crops and extension agents may completely ignore the needs of women farmers for training, for subsidized agricultural inputs or for information about emerging markets. Public health workers may neglect antenatal care for pregnant women, and the health sector may underinvest in referral systems for difficult obstetric cases and instead focus on the heart disease afflicting urban men. Worse, health workers might coerce women into agreeing to sterilizations in order to meet population control targets, or demand bribes for delivering a baby safely while a woman is in labour and highly vulnerable.

These abuses and sometimes worse are experienced by other categories of citizens that, like many groups of women, lack power and patronage—the poor in general, socially excluded groups such as “backward castes” in India, blacks in apartheid-era South Africa and pre-civil rights United States, or immigrant workers in many parts of the world. There is no doubt that there are class- and race-specific patterns of privilege in governance, but the fact that there are *gender-specific* varieties of institutionalized abuse reveals embedded gender biases in governance and accountability systems. Whether women enjoy formal recognition of full citizenship rights or not, a culturally normalized perception of their secondary social status can be institutionalized in systems for managing economic, infrastructural, social and security services, resulting in a biased distribution of public goods and services from health care to public safety. This gender-biased distribution can endow women with fewer resources than men, or it can reinforce the asymmetrical gender-based roles and responsibilities in which women and men are often trapped. The result is a reproduction of gender-based inequalities in power, privilege and the capacity to participate effectively in shaping public decisions.

In a well-functioning governance system, accountability institutions ought eventually to correct for these abuses. Elections, for instance, are essential accountability exercises, providing the means to correct for abuse of power. The motivation for introducing quotas for electoral seats for women, for instance, stems from an observation of in-built gender biases in seemingly gender-neutral systems for translating votes into the distribution of seats in government—biases that undermine coherent interest articulation among women and that prevent the translation of women's political preferences into the selection of representatives who will advance gender-equity interests. But even in the most effective states, gender-biased governing practices can slip under the radar of accountability institutions like electoral exercises, judicial review, public audit, monitoring and reporting systems in the public administration, and legislative oversight. Accountability institutions rarely review the actions of power holders, whether they are top decision makers or the frontline agricultural extension workers, from the perspective of whether they have supported women's rights. There are generally no consequences for failures to advance women's rights or support gender equality. There are no incentives to encourage politicians or public servants to respond with alacrity to women's needs, performance measures do not record and reward such performance, and reporting systems do not scrutinize women's experiences of effective public management, anticorruption efforts, and service delivery.

Contemporary governance reforms are very much animated by problems of low state capacity and weaknesses in accountability systems, but they have not so far been driven by concerns about gender biases in governance. International financial institutions such as the World Bank favour a narrow definition of “governance” as “the manner in

which the State exercises and acquires authority” (Campos and Pradhan 2003:1). What makes it “good” is the management of the economy to produce efficiency and growth. On this narrow definition, governance reforms must address problems of low capacity, inefficiency and a lack of accountability in budgetary, judicial, legislative and electoral institutions. Reforms to contribute to sound macroeconomic management include the creation of independent central banks and autonomous tax boards. Reforms to promote entrepreneurship and growth include protection of private property, assertion of the rule of law and enforcement of contracts. Reforms to improve public service delivery include results-based management in the public sector, civil service job cuts and retraining, improved budgeting and auditing, decentralization and anticorruption measures. Reforms to build public sector accountability include merit-based recruitment in the public service and support to the oversight committees of parliament. And efforts to combat corruption include strengthening judicial oversight functions and establishing special autonomous anticorruption commissions.

These reforms are intended to build public sector efficiency and effectiveness. Many bilateral donors and social activists, however, stress that the effectiveness of any state will be determined in large part by its legitimacy, and thus stress that governance is only as “good” as the manner in which power is acquired and eventually surrendered by rulers, and used to promote social justice (Santiso 2001:4). Political liberalization, social inclusion, accountability to the people and respect for human rights are therefore, from this point of view, also part of what is understood as “good governance”.

In its 2006 White Paper on governance, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) defines governance as “how citizens, leaders and public institutions relate to each other in order to make change happen. Elections and democracy are an important part of the equation, but equally important is the way government goes about the business of governing” (DFID 2006:22). DFID sets out three essential components of good governance:

- *State capability*—the extent to which leaders and the public administration can *get things done*.
- *Responsiveness*—the extent to which public policies and institutions *respond to the needs of citizens* and uphold their rights.
- *Accountability*—the ability of state checks and balances, civil society, the private sector and individual citizens to *scrutinize public actions* (spending decisions, policy implementation), to *demand explanations* and to *impose sanctions* for mistakes (for instance, by voting leaders out of office) (DFID 2006).

Each of these components of a governance framework is of relevance to gender-sensitive governance. For instance, the capacity of institutions to get things done is a particular problem in the case of promoting gender equality policies, which may be perceived as counter-cultural or as a foreign imposition or a resented conditionality attached to aid. The experience of “policy evaporation” in the case of gender equality policies demonstrates not just that many states have low capacity, but that they may have an especially low capacity to implement gender equality policies because such policies arouse social resistance and sabotage. Implementation of these kinds of policies requires more than what is normally understood by “capacity building”—more than training or improved work conditions. It can require a level of commitment to gender equality that is not common among either public- or private-sector workers, not part of performance standards and measures and not well rewarded in incentive structures.



The notion of *responsiveness*—the ability to take account of people’s aspirations and needs—requires that institutions create spaces for women to identify interests and to advance them socially, economically and politically. Supporting women’s engagement in representative politics (as electoral candidates, as voters, as party members) is one means of raising women’s voices. Provision of public goods and services in a way that expands women’s life options and builds their capacity to imagine and attain lifestyles that do not require dependence on men is another way of ensuring that women can voice their needs. At the heart of the notion of responsiveness is the idea that citizens must engage in *authorizing* (through the vote or other participatory and representative processes) power holders to take certain actions.

The final element of the DFID governance framework—*accountability*—is the most critical to sustainable governance reform. From a gender perspective, accountability requires that the decisions of actors operating in the public domain can be scrutinized by women citizens and civil society groups. But what are public actors to be held accountable for? This depends on what they have been *authorized* to do. Gender-sensitive accountability systems require not just women’s engagement in accountability mechanisms such as elections, judicial review, parliamentary debates and committee work, media scrutiny and the like, but also institutional reform interventions to make gender equality one of the objectives of public action, one of the things that public actors are held accountable for achieving. This means that public authorities must be asked regularly to explain and justify their efforts (or failures) to advance women’s rights, and there must be consequences for any abuses of women’s rights.

Most discussions of good governance in the development aid field appear to posit governance reform as a gender-neutral process, in the sense that there is little explicit mention of gender equality or women’s participation. It goes without saying that women stand to benefit as much as men from high-capability governance institutions that deliver services (justice, health, street lighting, education, public safety, property titling, opportunities for participation in public decision making) in ways that respond to people’s needs and that are not corrupt or biased. But there is no such thing as gender-neutral governance reform. If governance reforms are undertaken without an understanding of the governance deficits that undermine women’s rights and capacity to participate in public decisions, it is possible that they will reproduce gender biases and patterns of exclusion in the management of public affairs. As noted in a review of the European Commission’s approach to good governance, “governance which neglects the human rights, interests and needs of more than half the population, women and girls, cannot in any sense be described as good” (O’Connell 2006:18). The review goes on to say that “support is patchy to programmes and projects within the governance, democracy and human rights ambit which would increase women’s capacity to enjoy and exercise their human rights and would enable women to engage in governance processes and participate politically” (O’Connell 2006:25)—an observation that could be made about the governance programmes of most major development donors.

There are gender-specific capacity failures in all of the public institutions targeted by governance reforms that must be addressed in reform processes. Public expenditure management systems can unreflectively reproduce gender biases through budget processes that fail to acknowledge women’s needs and that distribute public resources in ways that reinforce women’s secondary social and economic status. Public institutions such as the civil service or the judiciary may be overwhelmingly staffed by men who may be unsympathetic to gender-equity policies emanating from the national leadership, and who

may therefore subvert them. Women public workers may be clustered at the bottom of state bureaucracies and may be the first to be fired when cost-cutting efficiency improvements are introduced. Rule-of-law reforms—even those limited to a focus on stabilizing the market for commercial activity—may have implications for women’s capacities to profit from their economic activities and to secure their assets. Legislative committees may be ill-equipped to conduct a gender analysis of the bills they review and will therefore fail women in their oversight functions.

Another feature of contemporary governance reform with important implications for women is the *de facto* and sometimes direct authorizing of private sector actors to take on more significant public roles in determining people’s needs. The championing of the private sector in the market—but also as a solution to many of the capacity ills of the state—produces serious problems of regulation, coordination and of course equity in treatment particularly in state services subcontracted to private providers. Privatization both of public industry (for example, rail transportation) and of services (for example, water, electricity, education, health) can exacerbate inequalities because consumers have differential purchasing powers and because the state does not have the capacity to regulate to assure equality of treatment. But another consequence of the empowerment of the private sector can be new and more informal forms of interference and influence in public affairs.

Simultaneous with the privatization of some state functions is an informalization of others, notably some judicial processes. Some decentralization processes empower traditional or customary authorities to take a larger role in governance and dispute resolution. Localization of decision making is intended to bring government closer to the people, but inevitably the most powerful local groups seize new opportunities for representing their own interests with more alacrity than the social groups that they subordinate. This process is exacerbated by pressure to recognize and reauthorize cultural groups that may previously have been oppressed by modernizing states. As Ribot notes, the result is a strengthening of lineage-based forms of belonging over residency-based citizenship (2007:44) and the public domain “being enclosed and diminished via various forms of privatization and de-secularization of public powers” (Ribot 2007:44). Fraser argues that this “politics of recognition”—sometimes made absolutely explicit in the ceding of control over personal and family law to customary or religious tribunals—has the effect of sidelining the more socially radical politics of redistribution. First to lose out from this process are women, whose human rights are subject to patriarchal interpretation as a part of the assertion of religious or traditional identities (Fraser 2000:112).

In effect, some features of governance reform that involve privatization of essential public services, localization of decision making and informalization of dispute resolution are producing new forms (or reauthorizing traditional forms) of social control. To the extent that governance reform processes are producing a recomposition of the state, of public and private power, and leading to the end of the era of the state as the authority determining fairness in public resource allocations, governance reforms are a matter of enormous concern to women. Women’s historical and well-grounded ambivalence about the modern state as a liberator from private tyrannies is giving way to an interest in shoring up its role as the apex public authority with a responsibility to defend human rights in all social relations. In this context, an expanded notion of governance that builds on democratic participation and respect for human rights is a starting point for bringing a gender equality perspective to the management of public affairs.

## **“Women’s National Machineries”—How Not To Approach Gender-Sensitive Good Governance**

One of the most familiar approaches to supporting a gender equality perspective within the state has been to support the establishment of “national women’s machineries”—ministries of women’s affairs, equal opportunities commissions, and the like. These institutions in their most ambitious incarnations are intended to act as oversight bodies, keeping a watching brief over government decisions to detect and discourage discrimination in public policies and resource allocation, or to stimulate more responsive governance for women. At their best, they have served this function. A comparative analysis of women’s political effectiveness across Europe finds that the presence of these women’s units is one of the key variables determining national progress in producing gender-equity policies (Squires and Wickham-Jones 2001). Another comparative study of over 30 countries, mostly members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), showed that national gender equality bureaucracies were decisive in supporting effective legislation on gender-based violence and effective services to survivors, but only on condition that they had already cultivated strong links to the domestic women’s movement (Weldon 2002).

Studies of women’s units in developing countries have suggested that they have had a very limited impact on national decision making or policy implementation. Instead, women’s units in the national bureaucracy have very often been captured by ruling parties, starved of resources and prevented from having effective access to decision making (Staudt 1985; Goetz 1995). Most of these bureaucratic units lack formal oversight powers to review policy making, and even if they do, they lack the person-power or technical skills to provide credible and comprehensive reviews, or the veto power to block policies that they deem discriminatory against women. Lacking the people or the power to make a difference to decision making and policy implementation, they often rely upon informal rather than institutionalized accountability controls—for instance, moral suasion and shaming (Waylen 2000:787).

These informal mechanisms are relatively weak tools for effecting governance transformation. The fact that women’s affairs bureaucracies are frequently captured by the ruling party—and even acquired as a personal fiefdom of a leader’s wife, as was the case under Jerry Rawlings in Ghana or Ibrahim Babangida in Nigeria (Mama 1998)—means that these capacity problems multiply. Such bureaucracies are hardly in a position to improve public sector responses to women’s needs. They lack the resources to provide an incentive to line agency staff to demonstrate greater responsiveness to poor women. They cannot change elements of the deep structure of institutions such as the performance measures that are used to gauge and reward achievements, or the criteria on which promotions are made. This type of “gender mainstreaming” serves merely to further isolate women from public decision making and to make gender equality issues marginal to public debates on poverty reduction, growth or security.

The marginalization and the limitations experienced by women’s bureaucratic units in many developing countries illustrate how not to approach governance reform from a gender perspective. The creation of a new bureaucratic structure with no leverage in the system, no incentives to offer, no means to execute a vast mandate, is a blueprint for building a gender ghetto.

## A Conceptual Framework for Approaching Governance Reform from a Gender Perspective

Governance reforms—particularly those embarked upon in the 1990s—have tended to start with civil service reforms designed to trim the cost of the public sector payroll, promote efficiency in service delivery and eliminate corruption. Radical “downsizing” measures have had very mixed results, and today’s civil service reform programmes focus less on saving money through job cuts than on a package of “new public management” measures that include outsourcing some of the functions of the public administration, encouraging better performance with new incentives, more effective performance monitoring and improved accountability mechanisms—as well as via the inclusion of civil society in accountability processes. As noted above, there is as yet little interest in, or understanding of, the ways in which the public administration could be reformed to promote gender equity.

The starting point for a diagnosis of gender biases in governance systems is at the interface between the state and women citizens, where gains or harms to women from interaction with the state are most starkly evident. The points of contact between women and state and also private institutions include the moments in which they seek treatment in health clinics, lodge complaints in police stations, assert their side of the story in court hearings or customary tribunals, make payments for electricity or water in the offices of private suppliers, seek a day job on minimum-wage drought-relief public works or apply for housing or land development loans at the local development office.

Gender biases can often be identified in the terms upon which people may have access to or be listened to in these institutions. Gender-specific *access* barriers can take the form of unintended obstacles to women’s participation that are embedded in the mobility, time, education, financial or language requirements for access to public institutions. For instance, women may not enjoy—to the same extent as men, even of their own social group—the time, resources or adequate familiarity with the legal system to travel to a court and wait for hearings. They may not be able to access agricultural credit because they cannot offer collateral in the form of a land title. These access barriers can be overcome once it is recognized that the terms of participation are constructed on the basis of assumptions about the resources and capabilities common to men, but not women.

More directly *intentional* access barriers—in other words, explicit exclusion of women—can take the form of predatory targeting of women for bribes when they are at their most vulnerable (for example, giving birth or needing to file a police report about gender-based violence). An important access barrier is the threat or risk of sexual harassment from public sector agents. These access barriers, which are part of an informal system of disciplining and reducing women, are difficult to tackle, requiring disciplinary measures and a change in the culture of some public institutions.

Performance measures too can be gender biased: health and education systems may deliver services that are not matched to poor or rural women’s needs, because medical treatment or curriculum development is guided by the preoccupations of elite and urban men. Performance measures, for instance, may not even register some of the types of inputs staff must make in order to empower women clients of public services, such as the long and slow work to apprise women of their legal rights or to build rural preventative health systems.

A common accountability failure that is embedded in the structure of public institutions is the weakness of the *remit* or mandate of these institutions when it comes to

recognizing women's rights (Goetz and Jenkins 2004:ch.3). Gender biases can mean that there is no remit in some institutions to serve women equally with men. Justice institutions, for instance, may not take action on sexual crimes committed against women in the home because they may not be deemed to have jurisdiction in matters between husbands and wives. Security institutions may fail to intervene to stop domestic violence because their mandate is to secure public safety, not to work in domestic space.

Accountability systems will not detect or check for these omissions because standards of probity in public actions will not necessarily posit gender inequities as intolerable and requiring official remedy. This can produce a marked bias against gender equity in public spending and service delivery, a bias not detected by institutions of accountability. This lack of answerability for gender equity on the part of powerful public and private actors contributes to the weak political "voice" of women, because gender inequalities in access to resources and social justice may go unchallenged, thereby undermining the power and influence of women in civil and political society. The value of governance reforms from a gender perspective will be whether they reduce these types of access barriers or remedy gender-specific blind spots in the remits of public institutions, or introduce performance measures that reward improved responsiveness to women clients' needs.

A neglected practical question in feminist approaches to improved policy implementation is whether adequate *incentives* have been created to motivate change. Politicians may not perceive any incentive to a women's constituency if women do not necessarily vote accordingly to respond to gender interests, or determine, as a voting bloc, the outcomes of electoral contests. Service providers may perceive no incentive to respond to women clients' needs because they can count on them to lack awareness about their entitlements and therefore be less likely than men to protest about poor service or abusive treatment.

In the literature on drivers of successful governance reforms<sup>3</sup> two sets of incentives seem to trigger governance reform efforts in the first place, and then to ensure compliance. The first set applies to the apex power holders and decision makers who must take the first steps in setting up and sustaining credible reforms. The second set of incentives applies to the people who have to *implement* reforms. Pragmatic gender-sensitive governance reform efforts would do well to reflect on what has worked in "mainstream" governance reform efforts and adapt this to the project of governance reform to benefit women.

From the perspective of top decision makers, political survival and reputation is the main incentive to reform, so reform often has to be conducted in such a way as to create opportunities to cultivate new support groups and alliances. Politicians will take the risk of embarking on reform if they are confident that social groups will respond creatively, rather than intransigently, to new policies. For women to get the governance they want, for them to be effective in demanding and negotiating for better services, their civil society activity—work with political parties, the media and their engagement in elections—must establish clearly what they have *authorized* public actors to do. Authorization in this sense is a matter of developing legislative agendas to remove gender biases in government policy, new gender-sensitive standards of accountability, and women's manifestos for

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<sup>3</sup> Therkildsen 1999; Jenkins 1999; Santiso 2001.

parties and monitoring systems.<sup>4</sup> The incentive to take any of this up, however, is tied to the electoral leverage that women's groups can exercise and as may be gleaned from other chapters in the *Governing Women* volume (Goetz 2008), much more can be done to increase women's electoral clout.

From the perspective of the bureaucrats and frontline workers who must implement reforms, any systemic reform that threatens established means of doing business and, more important, established channels of generating income or peddling influence via brokering access to state institutions and resources will be resisted or subverted by mid-level staff. A key incentive for changed behaviour on the part of these state workers is an *institutional survival alternative to patronage and rentseeking*. State workers need not only a level of remuneration that rewards effort but also a sense of mission, renewed professionalism, inspiration and social status—enough status to offset the condemnation that will flow from resisting pressures to favour their own specific social group.<sup>5</sup>

That incentives could trigger gender-biased performance is an unfamiliar idea. Contemporary incentive system reforms often introduce market-derived drivers of improved performance in order to produce a market-like response in public service provision. In these circumstances, incentives militate against the type of work performance required to respond to women's needs. The dominant incentives are for delivery of services at the lowest cost and greatest speed. This can forbid engagement in the wide range of time-consuming and potentially socially unpopular acts that might contribute to keeping girls in school, for example, or in helping women public service clients cope with the problems they face in their private lives that prevent them from making effective use of public resources.

Performance measures are linked to incentive systems and can likewise obscure and in effect prevent the types of actions needed to promote women's rights. One problem is that actions to promote gender equity are not always easily quantifiable—they may involve a long-term investment in gaining the trust of women clients and engaging with them on matters not directly related to the service in question.

Finally, accountability systems may completely overlook women's concerns about the nature of their interactions with the state. Accountability processes such as judicial review, performance appraisals or complaints procedures may simply not be accessible to women, especially not to those women most affected by state actions. Alternatively, macro-level accountability processes may simply exclude from their purview the local-level spending patterns or state worker performance that most directly shapes the experiences of ordinary women.

The point about the importance of gender-sensitive incentives, performance measures and accountability systems can be illustrated by a case of gender-sensitive public health service reform in the state of Ceara, north-east Brazil, outlined in a 1994 study by Tandler and Freidheim. This case—based on the recruitment of a new cadre of frontline workers, a new and largely non-monetary system of incentives, new performance measures and a commitment to transparency—produced a turnaround in a poorly performing public health system. In the space of five years, preventive health coverage went from 30

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, the gap between policy and implementation is always in part due to real resource constraints and to address this one would need to get into larger issues of debt, aid, trade and national budgeting. Here, however, the issue of a more equitable distribution of existing system resources is addressed.

<sup>5</sup> Analysts stressing the role of a renewed public sector ethos include Tandler and Freidheim 1994, and Grindle and Hilderbrand 1995.

per cent to 65 per cent of the state's population, contributed to a 36 per cent drop in infant mortality and tripled coverage of some vaccines (Tendler and Freidheim 1994).

This programme required the recruitment of 7,300 new basic community health workers (mainly women) and 235 nurse-supervisors to carry out infant vaccinations and child preventive health campaigns. Not only was merit-based recruitment emphasized in the widespread publicity campaign that accompanied the programme's launch but unsuccessful applicants and community members were also encouraged from the start to act as unofficial monitors of the programme and to report both poor performance and success stories. This informal reporting process evolved into a local accountability mechanism, in which the concerns and needs of women were prioritized.

Non-material incentives helped to cultivate an "organizational ethos" and sense of commitment (Grindle and Hildebrand 1995). Three months of training was offered to build skills and an *esprit de corps*, and uniforms and blue backpacks filled with supplies and baseball caps were issued to staff. These highly visible markers of affiliation with the exciting new programme acted as an incentive to staff to model a high degree of responsiveness in their interactions with clients. An unusual sense of "calling" was exhibited by the new women health agents. The need to establish trust with clients in order to do the job properly prompted an expansion of the job into simple curative interventions such as removing stitches, treating wounds and taking sick children to the hospital, in addition to a range of socially supportive tasks such as cutting children's hair, helping with childcare or assisting with cooking or cleaning.

By building a sense of the public's ownership of the programme, the state government generated a willingness on the part of ordinary people to act as informal agents of accountability. Poor performance or rule-subverting behaviour by programme workers was exposed in public—a severe form of social sanction. Public exposure was also employed to recognize and reward performance that met the needs of clients—for instance, prize ceremonies celebrated the work of particularly dedicated individuals or teams. Just as importantly, the "self-expanding" nature of the work—particularly the way in which the job evolved over time into a mothers' support system—created enhanced public expectations about the role of public sector workers.

In this and other public services, the key to reforms was not, as in so many public sector reforms, a standardization of tasks and a multiplication of reporting requirements upward in the chain of command. Far more important were measures to build an ethos that prized probity, commitment to clients, and higher standards of care toward the programme's poorer clients. This was achieved in part through non-material status-linked incentives. Also important were measures to by-pass or rupture the control of local politicians over programme budgets and personnel, through transparent recruiting, monitoring and rewards systems.

Another important dynamic, although Tendler and Freidheim do not comment upon it, must inhere in the fact that service providers and clients were both primarily women. By selecting staff members who were from the community and who identified with clients, the programme ensured improved access by public health workers to the domestic arena, the key forum for public health improvements. This access was exploited by the women health workers to augment the impact of their work. They gained the trust of clients by engaging in a range of non-programme goal-related activities, such as cutting the hair of children or stirring pots of food. These activities are time-consuming and would not have been possible had the health workers been driven to meet performance targets that valued numbers of contacts over quality of interactions.

In this case, the gender of the public sector workers was a significant factor in explaining success in reaching women clients, and this is likely to be the case in many developing countries when seeking to provide services to women, particularly in culturally sensitive areas such as reproductive health. But in the end, incentive systems are probably more important than the gender of public actors in shaping the way public sector workers respond to their clients. In other words, making incentive systems gender-friendly is as important as hiring more women staff. Performance measures or standards for monitoring the work of public sector staff need to recognize and reward women-friendly achievements—in this case, performance measures rewarded, instead of punishing, staff efforts to get to know their clients and build their trust by engaging in non-goal-related activities.

### **Public Sector Reform: Introducing New Incentives for Responsiveness to Women**

Governance reforms cover a vast gamut of formal institutions and processes. For reasons of space constraints we will focus here on just one reform area—civil service downsizing and performance review—to apply the analytical approach outlined above. To recap, this begins with a diagnosis of the unintended and also the more explicit forms of gender bias in governance systems, the identification of gaps in the remits of public institutions in terms of responsibility for promoting women's rights, and then the identification of means of bringing gender equality concerns to incentive systems, performance measures and accountability reviews.

Comparable cross-national data on proportions of public sector employees who are women, and on their position in public sector hierarchies, are difficult to obtain, but it tends to be the case that public bureaucracies display a marked gender asymmetry in their staffing patterns, with many more women at the bottom of hierarchies than at the top, and with women in a striking minority in public sector staff. International Labour Organization (ILO) figures show that women average less than 10 per cent of staff in public administration, defence and social security around the world, and between 10 and 20 per cent in education and health (ILO 2004). Only in some state-socialist and transition countries, and some Caribbean countries, do numbers rise significantly above these low averages. Downsizing programmes may not directly affect women staff if their representation in public sector employment is so poor. Downsizing programmes may target areas where female employment is particularly scarce but where overstaffing is particularly chronic, such as mining or transportation. On the other hand, in countries where women's share of public sector employment is high, such as Viet Nam, downsizing programmes had a devastating impact on women—in the early 1990s, 70 per cent of the nearly one million employees of state-owned enterprises who were laid off were female (Rama n.d.:7).

If governments make job cuts at the lowest levels of public services, this can mean that the proportion of women losing their jobs is greater than that of men, because they will be concentrated at these levels. If public sector reforms are trimming women out of the public service, or pushing them into temporary and insecure contracts, this is a key obstacle to the achievement of globally agreed goals on girls' education and women's health. Case studies of interactions between public sector workers and clients show that there are differences in the ways in which women and men government staff interact with



women clients, with women staff showing greater sensitivity and responsiveness to the problems of women clients.<sup>6</sup> This effect is only apparent, however, where a number of institutional factors combine to overcome professional and cultural biases against women. These include supportive top-level leadership, an organizational remit that includes responsibility to respond to women's needs, women staff crossing a numerical threshold of at least 30 per cent in the bureaucracy (Dahlerup 1986) and, as argued above, incentive systems that reward performance that advances women's interests.

The least controversial and simplest of measures to promote client responsiveness is the creation of opportunities for dialogue and consultation between providers and clients: citizens' juries, participatory needs assessments, participatory planning exercises, social audits of existing policy or services and conventional surveys or opinion polls. These exercises are one feature of new efforts to secure "direct" accountability of service providers to clients, engaging in both an ex ante deliberation over client needs and ongoing monitoring of service delivery. These measures are also intended to generate a stronger sense that women are authorizing gender-sensitive patterns of service delivery.

Arrangements for direct client consultation need to compensate for women's particularly acute deficiencies in time, basic literacy and skills in policy analysis. Experiences in promoting consultative exercises to help governments formulate poverty reduction strategies show that women's efforts to articulate their concerns often lose out to other more vociferous and more technically competent civil society groups. These experiences also show weakness of consultative mechanisms—there is a near-total disappearance of women's perspectives on poverty reduction priorities once the consultative stage is over, and government line and finance ministries resume the job of planning public spending for poverty reduction (Booth 2005).

Where direct citizen influence on service providers is not possible, a common civil society response is to publicize details about the gaps between government commitments and actual delivery, in the hope of embarrassing officials into a response. Exposure of maladministration is inevitably a confrontational business. In India, some organizations have developed a "social audit" of government spending for this purpose, in which actual public spending accounts are reviewed by the people meant to have benefited from these public resources. In eastern New Delhi, a small organization called Parivartan (Change) has used Delhi's 2002 Right to Information Act to secure service improvements from the city's water board and from departments responsible for road works, street lighting and park maintenance. Conscious of the fact that these issues were of greater concern in middle-class neighbourhoods and for registered service users, as opposed to more marginal populations, Parivartan began using the Right to Information Act to obtain information about government spending on primary schools in Delhi's low-income neighbourhoods, and exposed the fact that very little funding that had been promised to primary schools had ever materialized (Times of India 2003).

One increasingly widely disseminated method for monitoring government services and spending work is the "gender budgets" pioneered in Australia and South Africa (UNDP 2002:80). These analyse the likely gender-differential impact of planned spending in order to make positive links between national gender-equity policies and actual spending allocations. These analytical exercises—usually completed by civil society groups, sometimes in partnership with government departments—supply parliamentarians with

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<sup>6</sup> Thieleman and Stewart 1996; Goetz 2001; Keiser et al. 2002.

gender-aware budgets in the hope that they will use the information about gender-biased public spending to goad the executive into more appropriate spending patterns.

There are two obvious constraints on the effectiveness of supplying parliamentarians with critical budget analyses. First, it is next to impossible to avoid a substantial delay in producing these analyses since they cannot be conducted until after the budget priorities have already been announced. Second, even sympathetic parliamentarians cannot go much further than raising questions about gender-differential spending patterns. Government answers to these questions are rarely followed up.

Information on gender differences in actual spending would equip critics with the data needed to demonstrate deviations between what is budgeted and what is actually spent. Gender budget initiatives do not produce evidence that can be used for the *enforcement* dimension of accountability. A lack of access to (or even a right to) information on government spending is the main obstacle to this, but even if this information were available, it is not disaggregated by gender and therefore would be difficult to use.

Efforts to obtain better answers from public sector bureaucracies need to be combined with substantial and sustained social mobilization (to put pressure on officials and create an incentive for response). This may simply not be an option for poor women, with little time or other resources to apply to the task of holding public sector actors to account. Other incentive reforms focused at the working level of public and private bureaucracies could include: public sector reforms to bring gender equality into performance measures, financial and other incentives for improving the quality of services to women, assessments of good results, indicators of performance tied to salary increases or other kinds of recognition, citizens' vigilance committees either jointly with state officials or in parallel with state oversight functions, and report cards on service delivery.

## **Conclusion**

The problem of gender-sensitive governance is not solved through representation and affirmative action. It is solved through institutional reforms to the public sector to enable it to implement gender equality policies that may be resisted because they are counter-cultural, an affront to established ways of doing things. Whether we are concerned with poverty reduction, or with women's empowerment, efforts to deliver resources to or support the enjoyment of rights by socially excluded or oppressed groups require a significant investment by power holders in changing established incentives driving the behaviour of public sector actors. Implementing gender equality policy therefore requires significant public sector capacity. Accountability reforms are an essential element of this. Accountability systems must be refitted in order to detect and investigate failures to protect women's rights. They have to be made accessible to those who wish to seek redress for gender-specific abuses. They may need new ways of investigating accountability failures and new sources of information. Essentially, public sector actors who have been asked to respond to women's needs must be held to account for new standards of good performance.

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## Chapter 8

# South Africa: A Legacy of Family Disruption<sup>1</sup>

*Debbie Budlender<sup>2</sup> and Francie Lund<sup>3</sup>*

(2012)

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### Introduction

All social policy analysis, and social policies themselves, explicitly or implicitly contain a model of family life. Such a model expresses the care roles of men and of women, and the role of paid and unpaid work in earning income and providing for the material security and well-being of family members. Esping-Andersen's ground-breaking work (1990, 1999) on welfare regimes presented a framework for comparative analysis of social provision in advanced industrialized states. Criticized initially for its gender blindness, it nevertheless catalysed a new approach to social policy analysis and a new body of scholarship that has attempted to pin down axes along which welfare provision in different countries converge and diverge.

Perhaps inevitably, Esping-Andersen's initial focus on selected countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has been expanded to the analysis of other parts of the world, including Latin America, Asia and to a lesser extent Africa (Gough et al. 2004). This raises interesting questions about the extent to which policy analysis that is grounded in post-industrial countries can travel successfully to very different arenas. In particular, it raises questions about the extent to which family and household structure, labour markets and concepts of "employment", and assumptions about social provision are implicit in the Esping-Andersen framework and in subsequent variations thereof. It also raises questions about how far it can then be useful as a framing template in analysing other regions.

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<sup>2</sup> Debbie Budlender is a specialist researcher with the Community Agency for Social Enquiry (C A S E), a South African non-governmental organization working in the area of social policy research. She has worked for C A S E since 1988.

<sup>3</sup> Francie Lund is Director of the Social Protection Programme of Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), and is a Senior Research Associate at the School of Development Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban.

Armando Barrientos (2004) tackled Latin America as a region, characterizing it as moving toward a liberal-informal regime. Juliana Martínez-Franzoni (2008) took this further in her attempt to incorporate complex and extended family and kinship networks, which she rightly argued may be the norm in some developing country contexts. Welfare regime analysis of the Asian region has been undertaken by, inter alia, Gough et al. (2004), Ha-Joon Chang (2004) and Ito Peng (2012, which references her earlier work in this area).

The African continent has received less scholarly attention. Authors such as Gough et al. (2004) and Bevan (2004) have characterized Africa as having “in/security regimes”. Bevan points to features such as weak or failed states, small economies, local despotism, the absence of social benefits through work (due to the small size of the formal employment sector) and little social spending. South Africa is invariably treated as an outlier in the sub-Saharan region, where it stands apart for its sheer economic size. It has a relatively strong state, a large formal and small informal sector, and significant public social spending constituting a welfare regime within which the state plays a central part. In this contribution, we draw together unusual characteristics of the legacy created by the apartheid system, namely the state-orchestrated destruction of family life, high rates of unemployment and a high prevalence of HIV/AIDS. These lead to questions regarding who can be counted on to provide care, as well as who is assumed, in state policies, to fulfil the role of caregiver. The disruption of family life has resulted in a situation in which many women have to fulfil the role of both breadwinner and caregiver in challenging circumstances of high unemployment and very limited economic opportunities. This crisis of care raises a number of questions: who is actually providing the care and to what extent can or will social provision and employment-related social policies mitigate the care and provisioning crises in order to provide adequate support and security to women and children?

To pursue these questions, this chapter uses the lens of care for (and by) children. A foretaste of the starkness of the figures: in South Africa, only about 35 per cent of children live with both their mother and father, while at least an equal number live only with their mother. The majority of women have children, but a large number of them do so outside of marriage and with different fathers for successive children. Almost one-fifth of children have lost at least one parent. Only about one-third of the 12.7 million households conform to the “nuclear norm” of children and parents, with about one-fifth having three generations or more present in one household. Many grandmothers care for their grandchildren, often in the absence of the children’s parents. When family life is so disrupted and complex, is it necessary to use different approaches to the issue of care than those developed in advanced industrialized countries?

The chapter first presents survey data on marital patterns and living arrangements, and their implications for care. It shows the origins of the disruption of family life in the migrant labour system, a legacy that persists 15 years after the formal end of apartheid. Using data from the 2000 Time Use Survey (TUS; see Statistics South Africa 2000), it shows the significant differences in the amount of time men and women spend on care activities. It shows the large numbers of children living away from their parents, in particular from their fathers, and reveals that where relationships have formally broken down, relatively few fathers comply with the legal obligation to provide financial support for their children. The chapter also presents data on the catastrophic HIV/AIDS epidemic, which changes fundamentally who needs and who provides care. It then considers the extent to which labour market participation can act as a source of material

well-being for men, women and their children. Women are increasingly working in paid employment (though with low earnings), as well as having to provide more care. We suggest that, unlike in other countries where young girls may be withdrawn from school to provide care, in South Africa it is likely that unemployed adult women and older women pensioners are filling in as caregivers.

Since the democratic transition in 1994, the South African government has held fast to social spending on an array of programmes in the fields of health, education and welfare. We select those that may, intentionally or unintentionally, assist with care directly, or provide support to women carers in this role. An intervention such as the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) in the field of early childhood education has the dual objective of providing more childcare for more children, at this time of HIV/AIDS, as well as providing vocational skills leading to employment. The grants for elderly people are known to have redistributive effects in that they assist older women in their care responsibilities for younger people and enable younger women with children to seek employment. The post-apartheid government has, however, been unable to address the unemployment problem, and it has moved away from its initial commitment to universal free services in health and education. The inequality-creating effects of these trends are somewhat mitigated by the pensions and grants to which select vulnerable groups are entitled. It is also unclear whether the programmes have a transformative effect on the continuing patterns of family disruption or the burden of responsibility borne by women in an unequal environment. Indeed, they might well help to maintain the unequal burdens.

### **Living Arrangements, Marital Patterns and their Implications for Care**

It is often assumed that it is “normal” for parents to provide for children financially and otherwise. As we have noted, however, the nuclear family is not the norm in South Africa. Many households do not consist of two parents plus children, and a substantial number of children do not live with their biological parents. Furthermore, where children are living with their parent/s, fathers tend to play a much smaller role than might be expected.

**Table 8.1: South African household composition, 2005**

Household composition (generations)	Number of households	Per cent
Children only	67,590	0.5
Children and middle	4,386,951	34.5
Children and older	390,512	3.1
Children, middle and older	2,611,256	20.5
Middle only	3,270,368	25.7
Older only	1,120,835	8.8
Middle and older	865,339	6.8
Unspecified	13,418	0.1
Total	12,726,270	100

**Source:** Authors' own calculations based on the General Household Survey 2005 data set (Statistics South Africa).

Drawing on data from the General Household Survey of 2005 and ignoring gender for the moment, table 8.1 groups households with various combinations of “generations” with age groups where “children” are those up to 18, “middle” those between 18 and 49,

and “older” those 50 years and above. The table shows that just over a third (34.5 per cent) of all South African households conform to the “nuclear norm” of children and a middle generation. About a quarter (25.7 per cent) have the middle generation only, including couples who have not yet had children, people or couples whose children have grown up and moved on, people who have not had children, student households, and so on. About one-fifth, or 20.5 per cent, include three generations—children, middle and older people (and some households may include more than three generations).

Adding gender to the equation reveals further deviation from a nuclear norm of mother, father and children. The gender patterns can, at least in part, be explained by the country’s political past and, in particular, migrant labour and apartheid. Apartheid’s vision was, in crude terms, to reserve the cities for the white population, with the African (as defined by apartheid legislation) population, in particular, living in separate “homelands”. However, the apartheid economy could not have survived without the poorly paid labour of (mainly male) African workers who were allowed to live in the cities, towns and on commercial farms on a migrant basis in order to work for white-owned interests. They were for the most part required to do so alone, leaving wives, children and other family members behind in the homeland areas.

In its most formalized system—which operated in the large mining industry that underpinned the economy for much of the twentieth century—men were given eleven-month contracts during which time they were housed in single-sex compounds. They were thus able to be with their families for a maximum of four weeks a year—less if one deducts travel time. Inevitably, the system resulted in high rates of extramarital sex. It also provided very little opportunity for men to get to know and engage with their children. The pass laws, which restricted the movement of Africans, were formally abolished in 1986. However, the patterns that had been established during the preceding decades did not disappear with these laws. Instead, as seen below, South Africans continued to have lower rates of marriage and higher rates of extramarital childbearing than found in most other countries. Furthermore, men continued to engage very little with their children.

In all countries for which data are available, men are found, on average, to be significantly less involved in childcare activities than women. The situation in South Africa is extreme. Analysis of the Time Use Survey of 2000 (Statistics South Africa 2000) reveals that men aged 15–64 years spend an average of three minutes a day on care of persons while women in the same age category spend an average of 39 minutes per day caring for children in their own households. The estimate for women might at first glance seem low, but there are similarly low estimates for direct person care (most of which is childcare) in other developing countries (see, for example, Budlender 2008:16). The relatively low figure is explained by the fact that only about a third of women of this age spend time on childcare in an average day. The average time thus includes large numbers of women who do not fulfil any direct care duties. South Africa’s estimate for men, however, is unusually low when compared to other developing countries.

The “average” situation in South Africa can be at least partly explained by the fact that, 15 years after the end of apartheid and two decades after the abolition of the pass laws, the majority of children are still living apart from their biological fathers. In 2008, only 35 per cent of children (0–17 years) were resident with both their biological parents, while 40 per cent were living with their mother but not their father. More than four-fifths (81 per cent) of the 23 per cent of children living with neither parent had at least one parent who was still alive. Thus the fractured family set-ups cannot easily be explained by orphanhood due to AIDS-related deaths. Table 8.2 reveals that the proportion of



children living with both parents declined further over the period 2002–2008. Grandmothers account for the largest single grouping of those caring for children not living with their parents—again placing the burden of care firmly with women.

<b>Table 8.2: Living arrangements of children aged 0–17 years, 2002–2008 (percentages)</b>							
	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
With both parents	37.8	36.6	35.7	35.2	35.1	34.3	35
With mother only	38.1	37.9	39.5	39.4	38.7	39.8	40
With father only	2.9	2.9	2.7	2.9	3.0	2.8	3
With neither parent	21.1	22.5	22.1	22.5	23.3	23.0	23

Source: <http://www.childrencount.ci.org.za/indicator.php?id=1&indicator=2>.

Residence patterns of fathers and children cannot, however, fully explain the extremely small amount of childcare done by the average man. Indeed, the TUS 2000 found that men living in households that contained their own biological children under the age of 18 recorded fewer minutes per day (six minutes) spent on childcare than the average of nine minutes per day recorded by women living in households that contained no children at all (Budlender et al. 2001:68).

This lack of fathers' contribution to care activities runs parallel with little financial support. Many countries have legislation in place to ensure that parents provide financially for their children in the event of family disruption or dissolution. The South African Maintenance Act states that a non-resident biological parent must provide for his or her child, whether or not either parent of the child was married at the time of conception or birth of the child, or at some other point. However, the Act brings little relief to the many women who bring up their children without the father's assistance. Many men simply deny paternity or "disappear", while those who are deceased obviously cannot provide. Even if the father is identified and acknowledges paternity, the Act places an obligation only on those non-resident parents the courts consider able to afford the payment. With high levels of unemployment and many people earning low and uncertain incomes, there are many who are judged non-liable. Finally, the Maintenance Act is poorly enforced even when the man is identified and able to pay, and even where a court order has been issued.

Turning now to marital patterns, these could affect care responsibilities in different ways. First, it is generally assumed that marital patterns will affect fertility—although in South Africa the relationship between the two is much weaker than in many other countries, due to high rates of extramarital childbearing. Fertility will, in turn, affect the number of children who need care. Second, marital patterns will in part determine the extent to which carers can depend on others for assistance with financial provision as well as care. Third, marriage in itself usually creates obligations in respect of care between the partners. Finally, marriage and sexual relationships are important factors in the spread of HIV and AIDS, which in turn generates care burdens.

Household surveys over the period 1996–1999 suggest that only between 30 and 35 per cent of women aged 15–49 years were married, while a further 4–6 per cent cohabited with partners. Well over half (58 to 60 per cent) of women in their prime reproductive (and caring) years (15–49 years) had never been married. Yet, according to Moultrie and Dorrington (2004:9), in 1998 more than 30 per cent of never-married African women aged 45–49 years had more than three children.

Examination of census statistics reveals that the marriage rate among Africans has been declining since at least the 1960s (Mhongo and Budlender n.d.). Furthermore, in the period 1960 to 2001, the date of the most recent census, there was a larger increase in the reported number of never-married women than men. This pattern persists if the analysis is restricted to those aged 50 years and above. Thus in 1960, 2.9 per cent of African women aged 50 years and above were reported as never married, while in 1996 the amount stood at 19 per cent and in 2001 at 17 per cent. This pattern suggests that the decline is not simply the result of a higher age at first marriage. Instead, greater numbers of women, in particular, are remaining unmarried throughout their lives.

It is clear from the above that large numbers of children are being taken care of by other (largely female) relatives. The question arises as to the degree of choice exerted by mothers over this. In exploring the association between the feminization of poverty and the increase in female-headed households, Sylvia Chant suggests that in the Latin American context women are choosing separation from partners/fathers of their children, having seen the advantages of being on their own, such as control over their income, and freedom from coercion and violence (Chant 2008:175). O’Laughlin (1998) on the other hand, writing about Botswana, suggests that women’s choices to set up autonomous households with the father of their children are greatly constrained. These debates are relevant from a policy perspective in so far as they suggest that interventions oriented toward children, women and poverty should target female-headed households. But how relevant are they to South Africa?

In South Africa as elsewhere, “household head” as a concept has both theoretical and empirical flaws (Budlender 2003). The most common understanding is that the household head is the main income earner and the primary decision maker. Yet these two characteristics may not be attached to the same person, and different household members may have different views on who the main decision maker is, or who the head of the household is in terms of some other definition. The 2001 Labour Force Survey (Statistics South Africa 2001) left it to the respondent to decide what the meaning of household head was. In 11 per cent of households the main income earner was not named as head. In the 2002 General Household Survey (Statistics South Africa 2002), two out of five (41.5 per cent) female-headed households contained at least one male aged 18 years or more, and 20 per cent of all female heads of household replied that they were married.

In South Africa, many of the women who bear the main responsibility for both financial and other care of the children will not be the head of the household. This applies, in particular, to those who are the mother of the children rather than to those who are the grandmothers. Some will be living in households where their father is the head, some will have their mother or mother-in-law as the head, and others will have brothers, sisters or people in a range of other relationships as head. And, while many women with young children live apart from the fathers of the children, it does not follow that they are bringing them up on their own. A policy that focused on female-headed households would thus be of little benefit to the majority of women with whom we are concerned.

### **HIV and AIDS and Its Care Implications**

According to the AIDS and demographic model of the Actuarial Society of South Africa (ASSA), 11.4 per cent of the population of South Africa, or 5.5 million people, were

infected or living with HIV/AIDS in 2007. In 2005, African people were at least six times more likely to be infected than other population groups (Government of South Africa 2007:30) and this pattern will have continued.

Table 8.3 shows changes in the prevalence rates for men and for women between 2000 and 2007, making a distinction between the primary reproductive years (15–49) and primary economically productive years (20–64). The primary reproductive years are ones in which women are most likely to be rearing, in addition to bearing, children. The rate has changed relatively rapidly during the rampant epidemic. As is common in heterosexually driven AIDS epidemics, such as that of South Africa, women are more likely than men to be infected, for both biological and social reasons. Women are also more likely than men to be infected at an early age, reflecting in part the fact that women tend to partner with men older than themselves.

**Table 8.3: HIV/AIDS prevalence rates among women and men in South Africa, 2000 and 2007**

	Total population	Women 15–49	Men 15–49	Women 20–64	Men 20–64
2000	7.9	15.2	12.2		
2007	11.4	21.6	15.4	20.8	17.9

Source: ASSA demographic and HIV/AIDS model available at <http://www.assa.org.za>.

Using data from 33 sub-Saharan African countries, Bongaarts (2007) shows that the prevalence of HIV tends to increase in countries where a high average age of first marriage is combined with long periods of premarital sex—including with different partners. This finding helps to explain the high rate of infection in South Africa and neighbouring countries—all of which experienced high levels of male migrant labour during the twentieth century. Bakilana (2005) compares data from South Africa, Tanzania and Zimbabwe. She finds that, while South Africans tend to have their first sexual experience somewhat later than Tanzanians, the average age of marriage is much later than in the two other countries. This, she argues, increases the likelihood of multiple partners and the risk of HIV infection. What she does not say—but what follows from the above—is that it also increases the likelihood of having children outside of marriage, and perhaps multiple children with different fathers.<sup>4</sup>

High HIV/AIDS rates in the prime reproductive and productive years cast doubt on a social model that envisages that men in this age group will provide financially for their families while the women provide the care. HIV infection need not necessarily mean that a person is unable to provide for their and their family’s material and care needs. During the first years of infection, in particular, people are generally able to continue to function “normally”. However, this is generally not the case once people reach the stage where they are actually ill with AIDS. Instead of providing for others, those who are AIDS-sick will need to be provided for by others. This is the case unless, perhaps, they have access to anti-retroviral therapy (ART), which increasing numbers of people now receive: in 2007, over 370,000 of the estimated 890,000 people in South Africa who needed it were receiving ART, 78 per cent of them through the public health services.

The use of ART is likely to have a number of care-related impacts. There will be fewer orphans and sick babies and adults who need care. Also, many on treatment will need intermittent or continuous but lighter care. Some adults and children who would otherwise have died will continue to be available to participate in caring. There will be

<sup>4</sup> See the earlier and related hypothesis by Moultrie and Timaeus 2002:52.

decreased household expenditure on equipment for caring, but there may be additional expenditure on ART itself for those procuring it privately, and on monthly transport for those procuring it “free” from government. There will likely be a strong positive impact on the morale of health carers, as the people they care for get healthier, and have hope for the future. This is likely to be important as well in the motivation of the many household and community members who provide home-based care for others while being HIV-positive themselves.

The post-1994 government failed to develop a coherent policy on HIV/AIDS. A number of civil society actors—non-profit organizations (NPOs), religious organizations, human rights lawyers and leading academic researchers, among others—confronted the government, and much of their advocacy work has focused on securing more effective treatment for people with HIV/AIDS. Little, if any, attention has been given to the needs of carers, and the focus on treatment through ART may have displaced some of the policy attention that might otherwise have been given to the care needed by the seriously ill. There is also growing agreement that the ART policy itself, in Africa as a whole but especially in South Africa, offers too little to too few people, too late into the development of the illness. This has implications not only for those who are ill but also for home-based carers, for those working within the health system and for other resources within the system (Ford et al. 2009).

### **Participation in the Labour Market as a Source of Security**

The above description of marital patterns, living arrangements and the pervasiveness of HIV/AIDS suggests that women are likely to end up responsible for caring for their children both financially and otherwise. How important is the labour market as a source of income security, and hence of securing the money necessary for childcare? In this section we look at shifts in the structure of the economy, and at gendered trends in labour force participation, migration and unemployment.

In the South African economy as a whole, a marked shift has taken place away from the primary sector (mining and agriculture) toward the tertiary sector, with 79 per cent of women’s (and 56 per cent of men’s) employment being in the tertiary sector in 2006 (Statistics South Africa 2007, own calculations). The shift from mining is especially important given the key role this sector played in the country’s economic development. The reliance on mining had an impact beyond the economic sphere. The migrant labour system and accompanying laws controlling movement between rural and urban areas (often referred to as the “influx control laws”) played a major role in ensuring the profitability of mining. At the same time, it gave rise to many of today’s demographic and social patterns, through the fracturing of households over generations. We have seen that the fractured household pattern persists despite the relative decline of the mining industry.

Van der Westhuizen et al. (2007) examine the increasing feminization of the South African labour market, with women’s share of the labour force growing from 41.8 per cent in 1995 to 48.8 per cent in 2005. This feminization has entailed an increase in female unemployment rates, alongside the increase in the number employed. In addition, a large number of the new jobs accessed by women have been low paid, unskilled ones. Van der Westhuizen et al. (2007) offer several reasons for the greater increase in female labour force participation (compared to men) over the last decade. These include a

decline in the income of men to which women might have access, the HIV/AIDS epidemic (presumably as women are under increased pressure to earn when other sources of money are no longer available as a result of illness or death), an increase in the number of female-headed households (which often equates to households without adult men), the abolition of apartheid restrictions on movement and employment, and the impact of the Employment Equity Act (which stipulates equal opportunities for women and for men).

While female labour force participation has increased, the returns to women's work continue to be lower than those of men. In 2001, employed women within each of the four population groups tended to record lower hourly earnings than men—with the average hourly earnings of women expressed as a percentage of men's hourly earnings ranging from 91 per cent among coloured women and men to 71 per cent among white women and men (Budlender 2002:47). Nevertheless, the earnings gap between women and men in different population groups was greater than that between women and men within a particular population group. At the extreme, the average earnings per hour of African women stood at rand (R) 8.40 compared to R39.92 for white South African men.

Of those fortunate enough to find employment, more than one-third are in the informal sector, with 8 per cent working as domestic workers (almost all of whom are women). Excluding domestic workers, 34 per cent of employed women were in the informal sector, but only 25 per cent of employed men. African people were more likely than those from other population groups to be working in the informal sector. As in other countries, the informal sector tends to yield lower incomes than formal sector jobs.

Within-country migration for employment continues to be common in South Africa, but the characteristics of those who migrate have changed in important ways. In particular, the number of female migrants has increased relative to that of men. Thus already in 1999, women accounted for about one-third of people who were absent from the home for at least four nights a week for purposes of work or work-seeking.<sup>5</sup> The great majority (83 per cent) of these migrants were from rural areas. Among both men and women, 60 per cent or more were in the 20–39 age group, which encompasses the primary childbearing and childrearing years, raising questions as to how the care burden is then dealt with. While men's tendency to migrate has been offered as a reason for their limited involvement in childcare, an increase in women's migration does not seem to have affected the extent of *their* engagement in childcare—instead, it has probably increased the extent to which older women engage in childcare. Large household surveys in two quite different rural areas found a significant association between the receipt of a pension by an elderly woman and the departure of a younger mother in order to seek work (Ardington et al. 2007; Posel et al. 2006). We return to this theme later.

Turning to unemployment, current unemployment rates are high for both women and men, but higher for the former. Thus, in September 2006 the female unemployment rate was 30.7 per cent, compared to 21.2 per cent for men. The unemployment rate for African women was 36.4 per cent (Statistics South Africa 2007:iv, xviii), compared to 25.3 per cent for African men. There have been lively debates about both the measurement of unemployment and the factors driving and sustaining it. There is general agreement about the detrimental role played by the creation of the homelands, in which millions were trapped or forced to move to areas disconnected from markets, and in which there was limited paid employment aside from the civil service. Since the

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<sup>5</sup> Budlender (2002:54–55), drawing on the *General Household Survey*, October 1999.

democratic transition, the government and unions have held summits leading to statements that are high on rhetoric but do not translate into realistic programmes. Employment creation at a time of slow economic growth is not easy. There is general agreement, including among government officials, that the mechanisms employed to catalyse and support small enterprises were poorly designed and targeted. The spatially segregated settlement patterns of apartheid still situate poorer people far from markets. While opportunities have been created for new elites, it is difficult to create jobs for people whose low level of skills does not match labour market requirements. The public works programmes may provide a bridge into the market for a few, but they are essentially poverty alleviation programmes and cannot create sustained employment for many. Finally, the apartheid era overregulation and size of the formal economy may itself have “crowded out” space for smaller enterprises to develop (for example through the penetration into deep rural areas of formal supermarkets).

In sum, South African women are increasingly engaging in paid work, but many who wish to do so—and, indeed, need to do so to cater for their own and their family’s needs—are unable to find work. An unintended outcome of the combination of high rates of unemployment with large, complex households within a context where HIV/AIDS is rife is that some unemployed women can pick up the burden of care for children—inside or outside their own households—that would otherwise fall to men or to the state.

## **Policy and Programme Interventions**

We have discussed the impacts of the political and economic history of South Africa on family life and employment, as well as the double burden of breadwinning and caregiving that befalls women. We have shown how, among middle-generation women, the HIV/AIDS epidemic has resulted in an increase in the need to be cared for, in addition to being providers of care. We now turn to the question of whether and how state provision of social and employment programmes alleviates or intensifies the double burden women bear. We focus particularly on programmes that intentionally (the early childhood development component of the public works programme and the grant for young children) or unintentionally (pensions that go to older people and especially women) have impacts on the care of children, and women’s participation in the labour market. How states provide or support care can alleviate care burdens and enable better quality of childcare, which may be reconcilable with higher rates of women working. Conversely, failure to provide or support affordable care may trap women (and their children) in poverty.

With the first democratic elections in 1994, it was expected that the new government would pursue redistributive social policies in accordance with the Freedom Charter of the 1950s, which expresses the right to social services, especially free health and education, for all. The ANC government rapidly withdrew from commitments made in the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) through adopting a conservative macroeconomic policy—Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR)—in 1996. GEAR had many neoliberal features, but the government also increased the size of the civil service, included land reform (though the land reform process has been very slow) and increased allocations to social provision (as a percentage of GDP). State expenditure trends on education, health and welfare services (this last covering personal social services and state social assistance) between 1997/1998 and 2007/2008 show a

clear increase in the absolute amounts allocated for social spending over this period, with a relative decline of the proportion spent on education and health respectively, but a rise in the welfare proportion (a category that includes social assistance grants). The proportion of GDP spent on these three items combined remained constant, at 13.1 per cent in both 1997/1998 and 2007/2008 (Budlender and Lund 2007). Nevertheless GEAR has signally failed to make a dent in unemployment or address income poverty—though there is evidence of a significant increase in non-income welfare through the provision of basic services, as pointed out by Bhorat et al. (2007).

There has been some progress. Almost all children now attend school: enrolment rates for primary school and upward are over 95 per cent for children aged 7–17 years (Monson et al. 2006:72). The quality of education is, however, poor. In the public health sphere, there is now free primary health care for all, with free specialized services for pregnant mothers and children under the age of six. There has been a significant expansion of facilities to rural areas; a district health system meant to further the idea of integrated local-level services has been introduced with primary facilities for preventive and elementary curative care as first port of call. Abortion has been legalized, giving women more control over unwanted pregnancies, and generic drugs have been introduced, giving more people access to affordable medicines. However, there are parts of the country where health services are collapsing—staff refuse to comply with the demand for abortions and preventive services are overwhelmed by the need for clinical care for those with HIV/AIDS. Also, a small proportion of the population benefits from high-quality health services provided by the private sector and through private insurance while the majority are poorly served by inadequate public services. And while many services could be seen to be biased toward women in the sense of reaching more women than men, the bias does not adequately address the unequal burdens borne by women and men. Universal access to good quality healthcare can significantly reduce the unpaid care burden assumed by women in households, especially in the context of a pandemic such as HIV/AIDS. When access is hampered or difficult, and the service of dubious quality, then the burden shifts back to unpaid care in households.

Starting in the late 1980s, organizations in the welfare sector began advocating a shift toward “developmental social welfare”, or “social development”. This was a change from curative care to a more preventive, developmental and community-based approach. The vision is worthy, and the government now provides financial support to a more inclusive range of NPOs, with easier regulatory processes. The rhetoric of “community”, however, obscures the fact that funds are cut back on the very services (such as institutional care for the elderly and for those with psychiatric problems) that provide much-needed support to those who cannot function independently, and that relieved the burden on the (largely female) household members who must otherwise provide or buy in care.

### **Early childhood development**

We focus now on two programme areas that impact on childcare and potentially on women’s employment: the early childhood development (ECD) arena, and pensions and grants for elderly people and for children.

ECD programmes in South Africa focus, at least in policy papers, on children up to the age of nine. In the 1980s there was an active lobby among NPOs for ECD policy and provision. The policy choices put forward were posed as “width versus depth”, with the choice between either an adequate level of care for many children provided by a large cadre of women with little formal training, or on proper preparation of children for

school readiness, provided by women at a much higher level of skills with the implication that fewer children would be reached at least in the short term. Government resources have tended to focus on the latter approach with substantial expansion of what is known as Grade R, a single pre-primary school year that government hopes to have universally implemented within the next few years. Much of this provision takes place in public primary schools.

The annual General Household Survey has also captured a steady increase in the percentage of children between two and six years old “attending educational institutions”, from 22 per cent in 2002 to 32 per cent in 2007 (own calculations). However, this still leaves the majority of younger children requiring full-time care from elsewhere. Even those attending facilities will require care for most of the day as provision for young children is often only half-day. Many children in better-off households will be cared for by paid domestic workers, of whom there are about one million in South Africa (the vast majority of whom are African women).

The government subsidizes some NPOs to implement ECD services (somewhat similar to what Peng (2012) shows for South Korea). The small size of the subsidies means that the caregivers of the children would generally have to pay fees to supplement the funds. Public sector support to the NPOs has for a long time been supplemented by unsubsidized formal fee-paying pre-school care, attended mostly by middle class children. There are also innumerable informal facilities in poorer people’s private homes and backyards in urban townships and informal settlements. Fees are charged, but often paid erratically. In order to obtain a subsidy, an ECD centre needs to register both as an NPO and as an ECD provider and must also meet health and other standards—requirements that prevent many facilities in poorer communities from becoming registered, and thus from obtaining the subsidy.

The South African government has included ECD support as a component of its public works programmes, aiming to improve access to childcare facilities and childcare, provide employment opportunities for women (and some men) in the programmes and promote the professional development of (mainly) women working in childcare. These goals explicitly relate to care work, and the programme is an interesting example of a government promoting interaction between public and private provision. For this the state relies on the extensive network of existing NPOs, some of which receive some government subsidy, and in which it is estimated that only about 10 per cent of caregivers are qualified. Within the public works programme, the state subsidizes learnerships (a form of apprenticeship) for staff of NPO ECD organizations. The programme currently concentrates on site-based provision (that is, specialized community-based facilities). Its potential importance is in developing better care and school preparation for children, combined with employment creation for women—all being run through NPOs, with government support.

Statistics about the scope, coverage and impact of the ECD public works are unreliable and implementation has been much slower than planned (Budlender and Parenzee 2007). There are few existing ECD organizations in the rural areas where the need is greatest, both in terms of the absence of facilities and the lack of employment for women (Berg 2007). In some of the EPWP projects only training is given, with no work being available after the training. The stipends paid in the social programmes of the EPWP are appallingly low. Rates as little as R9 per day can be found and even the higher rates are lower than stipends paid in the more traditional public works programmes where men more typically work (Budlender 2009). Thus the state, which is usually seen as



a “good employer” with high standards of both employment security and income, allows in this arms-length programme, through the NPO sector, the endorsement of lower-than-poverty earnings, especially for women carrying out care work.

### ***Pensions and grants and the implications for care***

Non-contributory and unconditional cash transfers played a vital role in the alleviation of poverty for a number of years before the collapse of the apartheid system. They also enabled care for and by elderly people, people with disabilities and those who care for children. The system was introduced for whites early in the twentieth century and then gradually extended to include the whole population. Anticipating the democratic transition, toward the end of the 1980s the racially discriminatory aspects of the system were gradually removed (with the exception of the grant for women and children), culminating in parity in 1993.

The role of grants in the reduction of inequality between white and black people, and in the redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor, is clear. Using household income and expenditure data for 2005/2006, the official statistical body claims that: “The Gini coefficient based on disposable income (from work and social grants) for the whole country was 0.72...If social grants and taxes were excluded, the Gini coefficient for the whole country would be 0.80 rather than 0.72, that is, the reduction of inequality through redistributive policies reduces the Gini coefficient by 8 percentage points” (Statistics South Africa 2008:3).

The best known of the grants—and the one whose impact has been most closely studied—is the pension for elderly people. It is means tested on income. Historically, eligible women received it at 60 and men at 65, but the eligible age for men has been lowered to 60. Its receipt has thus far been biased toward women, who have received it at a younger age, tend to live longer and are more likely to pass the means test. It is well-targeted for rural areas, is presently valued at R1,010 per month in late 2009 and goes to well over 85 per cent of elderly South Africans (the vast majority of whom are poor Africans).

The direct beneficial impacts of this pension have been well-measured—impacts both on the elderly themselves and on those in their households with whom it is typically shared. When the pension started being a significant force in African households in the mid-1980s, early studies focused on the positive impacts for pensioners themselves—their health, self-esteem and role in the household. Attention soon turned to the impacts on pensioners’ households. In all studies, and measuring a number of different variables, with large sample sizes, it makes a pronounced difference whether the pension money comes in through the male or female pensioner. As expected, that which goes to women is “spent better” than that which goes to men. Case and Deaton (1998) found this in regard to pension spending on household goods. Case and Menendez (2007) found that money accruing to women pensioners increases the likelihood of girl children staying longer in school more than it does for boy children (though it makes a positive difference to boy children as well). In a study conducted in 2001, Case highlights the positive impact of all pension income on pensioners themselves, and on the health status in general in the household. Results are significantly better for the health status of children when the pension recipient is an older woman, and pension households have a greater number of younger children in them than non-pension households. It is very difficult, given available data, to establish whether pensions “cause” changes in household structure—it would be extremely unlikely, however, that they do not do so.

There has been a tendency in some studies to try and prove that public spending on pensions “crowds out” private savings (Jensen 2003). A counter-argument is that, on the contrary, pensions “crowd in” care by pensioners of other household members (Lund 2002). Other quantitative analysis has tried to show that pensions coming in to households are associated with prime age adult men voluntarily leaving employment to come and live off the older pensioner who now has an income (Bertrand et al. 2003). However, these findings have been countered: Ardington et al. (2007) found that pensions in fact increased employment among prime-age household members; Posel et al. (2006) showed an association between receipt of the pension by the older woman and a younger mother in the household going away to seek work and leaving her child with her mother, aunt or mother-in-law. Finally, study after study points to the support that pension money provides to older women who care for grandchildren when the mother has died of AIDS. Pension pay-days in rural areas have become vibrant informal market days on which locally produced and retailed goods from urban areas are traded.

The major change to this system of social assistance since the democratic transition was the introduction in 1998 of the child support grant (CSG), which is now one of the three types of grants aimed at children and their carers. It is targeted at children in very poor households and paid to the child’s primary caregiver (not necessarily the biological parent). The grant is means tested on income. Eligibility was initially for children up to their seventh birthday; since then this has been extended up to their fifteenth birthday, with a further phased extension to eighteen years of age starting in 2010. Introduced at an amount of R100 per child per month, it had risen to R230 per month by the end of 2008, when it reached 8 million children. The vast majority of applicants are women, the majority of whom are the biological mothers, the rest being largely grandmothers or other older relatives, though increasing numbers of fathers have recently applied (see Lund 2006 for specifically gendered questions around the take-up of various grants). By 2008, over 80 per cent of eligible children were getting the grant. There are still substantial administrative and bureaucratic hurdles, and isolated pockets of the country where the grant seems not to penetrate at all. Children who are not in the care of a person aged 16 years and above cannot access it, and two vulnerable groups of children who are thereby excluded are those in child-headed households and those who live on the streets (Budlender and Woolard 2006).

Evaluations show that the grant is acting as a small but useful supplement to the household budget. With regard to impacts, grant recipients stay in school for longer (Case and Ardington 2004); one study in KwaZulu-Natal finds that it has beneficial effects on children’s nutritional status (measured in height-for-age) (Agüero et al. 2009). Both of these outcomes should contribute to longer-term improvements in the life chances of children. The amount of the grant is so very small that one would not expect an impact on work-seeking or employment patterns of either men or women.

All of the social assistance grants are unconditional. This is unlike most of the Latin American programmes and runs counter to the World Bank’s policy stance that they should be conditional—in other words, that women’s receipt of the money should be contingent upon their having to perform certain tasks that may themselves incur investments of women’s time and energy, such as to ensure that all family members go to a clinic. Thus in South Africa there is no concern, such as that expressed by Molyneux

(2006)<sup>6</sup> about the PROGRESA/Oportunidades programme in Mexico, that formal features and requirements of the programme increase women's care responsibilities even further. There is, however, clear evidence of sexist and abusive behaviour by officials within the system toward the elderly and toward young female applicants for the CSG (Goldblatt 2005).

## **Conclusion**

We have argued that the years of colonialism followed by apartheid left South African society with a legacy of disrupted family life that has, and will continue to have, long-term consequences on caregivers' responsibilities and ability to care for children. The gendered patterns of care remain in which men take little responsibility for financial or other forms of support while women try and reconcile the need to be both carers and income earners. Government has invested significantly in social provision. A number of good social policies were developed, some were implemented and others reneged on or distorted in the process of implementation.

Government has continued to shape care arrangements among beneficiaries through extending and to some extent making more accessible education, health and welfare services. However, the parallel systems in health and education, of poor public services for the poor and expensive private services for the better off (McIntyre and Thiede 2007) continue to entrench patterns of inequality. Chisholm (2005) describes the historical continuity with the racialized apartheid past that is still found in education, and this is similarly the case in health. Some of this inequality is mitigated through the systems of pensions and grants, a large portion of which go to women and children. However, at least some of that grant money for the poor is spent on buying poor people's access to health and education services, in the form of transport, money for medicines and for expensive school fees and uniforms.

The public works project in the ECD field attempts to develop an employment market for women in this field, as well as to address the need for extension of facilities for childcare. However, in poorer rural areas, where the need for child facilities and for employment for women is greatest, there is simply no "market"—there is a demand for services, but there are insufficient jobs in the ECD field and caregivers (such as mothers) do not have the money to pay for the service. The exceptionally low stipends for women participating in the public works programmes are rationalized through hopes of future work availability; at present, however, women derive almost no short-term material benefits from their participation.

This extent of state involvement in social provision is remarkable when compared to developing countries in general, and to other African countries in particular. Some of the forms of provision may seem to accept too readily that mothers, wives and daughters are "natural" care providers. However, the historical legacy of disrupted family life and distorted markets has meant that women, and especially older women, shoulder a large part of the care work for children. This is now exacerbated by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, in which mothers in their reproductive and productive years are dying in large numbers, further increasing the burden of care by the elderly. It is likely that the high

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<sup>6</sup> Editors' note: Molyneux 2006 is included as chapter 7 in the present volume.

unemployment rate among women is enabling unemployed women to shoulder some of the care responsibilities of women in paid work.

South Africa's history has led to these patterns of profound disruption and inequality. Nevertheless, some of the characteristics of fractured family life, high HIV/AIDS rates, and severe unemployment and underemployment, are shared with other countries—countries that do not, however, have the same resources to allocate to social spending. An exploration of the South African situation demonstrates well how commonly made assumptions in social policy—about “typical” family forms, about parental responsibility for children, about the role that is likely to be played by the labour market in implementing state provision—simply cannot be taken for granted. This problem for policy analysis cannot be solved by “tweaking” welfare regime analysis with caveats. It may be that a reconceptualization of the approach to the analysis of care is needed.

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## **GENDERED DIMENSIONS OF DEVELOPMENT**

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## Chapter 9

# Why Care Matters for Social Development<sup>1</sup>

*UNRISD*

(2010)

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Care work, both paid and unpaid, contributes to well-being, social development and economic growth. But the costs of providing care are unequally borne across gender and class. Families in all their diverse forms remain the key institution in meeting care needs. The challenge is to forge policies that support them and are grounded in certain key principles: recognize and guarantee the rights of caregivers and care receivers; distribute the costs more evenly across society; and support professional, decently paid and compassionate forms of care.

### **The Issue**

*Unpaid care work* includes housework (meal preparation, cleaning) and care of persons (bathing a child, watching over a frail elderly person) carried out in homes and communities. Such work contributes to well-being and feeds into economic growth through the reproduction of a labour force that is fit, productive and capable of learning and creativity. Women perform the bulk of unpaid care work across all economies and cultures. Furthermore, it is estimated that if such work were assigned a monetary value it would constitute between 10 per cent and 39 per cent of GDP.<sup>2</sup>

Despite its economic value, unpaid care work is not included in labour force surveys. Nor is it brought into the calculation of GDP. It is therefore invisible in representations of the economy that inform policy making. Similarly, despite its importance for meeting many of the Millennium Development Goals (reducing child mortality, achieving universal primary education, combating HIV/AIDS, reducing maternal mortality), the MDGs themselves do not mention unpaid care work.

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<sup>1</sup> Originally published by UNRISD as a Research and Policy Brief series (UNRISD, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> These figures have been calculated for the six countries that formed part of the UNRISD study, by multiplying the estimated number of hours spent on unpaid care by a “generalist wage”, that is, using the average wage paid to a worker, such as a domestic worker or housekeeper, who would carry out virtually all care-related tasks (Budlender 2008).

*Paid care services* such as childcare, elder care, nursing and teaching also constitute a growing part of the economy and of employment in many countries. In the United States, for example, professional and domestic care services have grown from employing 13.3 per cent of the workforce in 1900 to 22.6 per cent in 1998 (almost as many workers as the manufacturing sector). In India, there has been a significant increase in the numbers of domestic workers over the last decade of economic liberalization. When care work is decently paid and protected, it can meet the interests of both workers and users of services. But this is not often the case.

Why should development policy be concerned about care? Some would emphasize its importance to processes of economic growth, whether in terms of its contribution to “human capital” formation or as a component of “social investment”. Others see care more broadly, as part of the fabric of society and integral to social development. How societies address care also has far-reaching implications for gender relations and inequalities.

The need to address care through public policy is now more urgent than ever. Women’s massive entry into the paid workforce—a near-global trend—has squeezed the time hitherto allocated to the care of family and friends on an unpaid basis. At the same time, population ageing in some countries, and major health crises (especially HIV and AIDS) in others, have intensified the need for care services. In many developing countries where public health systems have been severely weakened during the decades of market-oriented reform, much of the care burden has fallen back on women and girls.

Care underpins social and economic development, yet arrangements for its provision in developing countries have been little studied. UNRISD research has begun to fill this gap.

#### **Box 9.1: UNRISD research on political and social economy of care (2007–2009)**

This chapter summarizes selected findings from the UNRISD project “Political and Social Economy of Care”, which included six in-depth country studies from three regions: Argentina and Nicaragua; India and the Republic of Korea; and South Africa and Tanzania. Countries were chosen based on two criteria: first, for each region, one country with a more developed and the other with a less developed social policy architecture; and, second, the availability of at least one Time Use Survey. Teams in each country researched four related issues: (i) economic, social and demographic change over the past 20 to 30 years; (ii) data from Time Use Surveys; (iii) social and care policies and institutions; and (iv) selected groups of care workers (their wages, working conditions and how they meet their own care needs and the care needs of their dependants). Japan and Switzerland were also studied so as to provide comparisons of care systems in two industrialized economies. Five thematic papers complemented the country-level research.

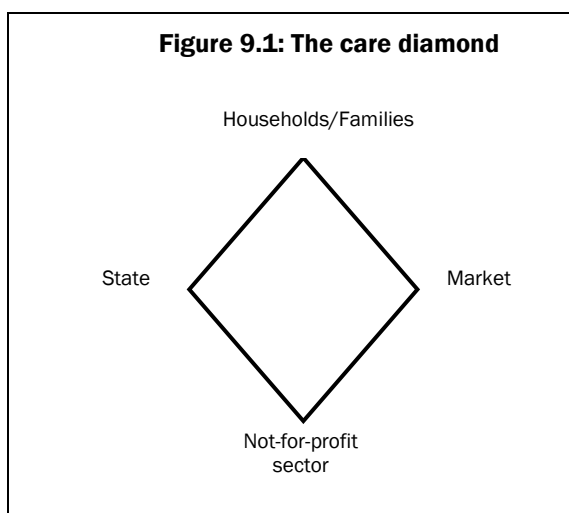
## **Research Findings**

UNRISD findings challenge the view that only more developed countries can afford specialized care provision by the state and market, while poorer countries have to rely on unpaid family and community solutions. Explicit care policies may be rudimentary in many developing countries, but a wider range of policies influence the supply of care: infrastructure development, social service provisioning and social protection programmes. Furthermore, many developing country governments are experimenting with new ways of responding to care needs in their societies. The variations across countries in how social and care policies *are* taking shape hold important policy lessons.



### ***Institutions handling care provisioning***

Four main institutions are involved in the design, funding and delivery of care: households and families, markets, the state and the not-for-profit sector. These institutions can be represented as a “care diamond” (figure 9.1). Yet they interact in complex ways, and the boundaries between them are neither clear-cut nor static. For example, the state often funds care services that are delivered through non-profit organizations. Furthermore, the role of the state is qualitatively different from that of other pillars of the care diamond, because it is not just a provider of public care services, but also a significant decision maker when it



comes to the rights and responsibilities of other institutions. Whether and how the state makes use of its role is fundamental for defining who has access to quality care and who bears the costs of its provision. The effective creation, regulation and funding of care services can increase the access, affordability and quality of care and reduce time burdens placed on unpaid caregivers. Parental leaves, family allowances and other transfers can be financed through taxes or social insurance programmes, thereby socializing some of the costs assumed by unpaid caregivers.

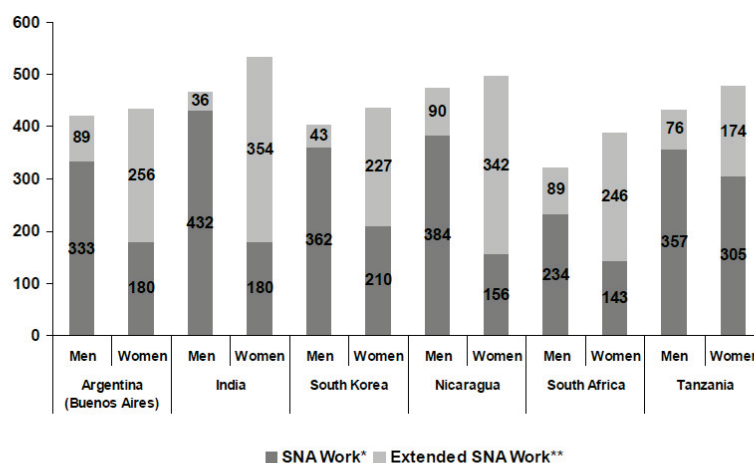
### ***The role played by institutions in various countries***

When the state lacks the capacity (or political will) to provide, fund and regulate care adequately, families and households inevitably take on a greater share of its provision. This is not limited to developing countries. In countries as diverse as Italy, Japan, Spain and Switzerland, most families are left to make their own arrangements for care provision—sometimes by hiring informally employed migrant workers. In the context of economic crises in particular, as public provisioning of infrastructure and welfare services is eroded, care responsibilities are often shifted back onto families. At the same time, purchasing basic necessities and care substitutes also becomes difficult due to the fall in earnings and the disappearance of jobs.

### ***Women’s key role in unpaid care provision***

Women carry out the bulk of unpaid care work—and not just in times of crisis. Indeed, despite important variations in demographic, economic and social indicators, gender gaps in the time allocated to unpaid care are large and significant across countries. More women than men participate in unpaid care work and allocate substantially more time to it (figure 9.2). For all countries included in the figure below, the mean time women allocate to unpaid care work is twice that for men; the gender gap is most marked in India and smallest in Tanzania.

**Figure 9.2: Mean time spent per day on SNA work and extended SNA work** (in minutes, by country and sex for full sample population)



\* The System of National Accounts (SNA) distinguishes production that should be included in calculations of GDP and production that should be excluded. SNA work includes the production of all goods (whether or not they are sold on the market). In respect of services, in contrast, only those that are sold on the market are included.

\*\* Extended SNA—or unpaid care work—refers to work that is excluded from the calculation of GDP. Housework in one's own home, and unpaid care for children, elderly people, the ill and disabled are not included in the calculation of GDP.

Source: Budlender 2008

Unpaid care holds intrinsic rewards for many caregivers. However, in societies where recognition and reward generally rest on an individual's participation in the paid economy, such work implies significant costs in the form of financial obligations, lost opportunities, foregone earnings as well as physical and emotional stress. Furthermore, in poorer countries where access to suitable infrastructure and labour-saving technology is limited, many of the tasks associated with unpaid care are particularly time-consuming and arduous.

While women spend less time on paid work than men, they do spend more time working if all types of work (paid and unpaid) are combined. This means less time for leisure, education, political participation and self-care. As may be expected, the presence of young children (under six years of age) significantly increases the time spent on unpaid care, as does lower household income. Indeed, women in low-income households allocate more time to care-related tasks than those in high-income households—a reflection of the limited possibilities for purchasing care services, larger household size and lack of infrastructure. Time-use data on fuel collection in Tanzania illustrate this point. While 42 per cent of females and 22 per cent of males from the poorest households report some time spent on fuel collection, the shares drop to 15 per cent and 7 per cent respectively in relatively wealthy households.

### Resources required for caregiving

Good care requires a variety of resources including *time and material* resources. While *time* is a key input into care provision in both developing and developed country contexts, there are several other critical *pre-conditions* for caregiving, including the availability of:

- *paid work* (or, in its absence, *social transfers*) to ensure sufficient income with which to purchase the necessary inputs into direct caregiving (providing acceptable nutrition, paying transport fees to reach the nearest health centre);
- appropriate *infrastructure and technology* (water and sanitation, domestic technology) to increase the efficiency and lessen the burden of unpaid domestic work; and

- *enabling social services* (health, primary education) to complement unpaid caregiving.

None of these can be taken for granted in a developing country context. In addition to these broader enabling conditions, ensuring adequate care also requires specific policies with a direct bearing on care provision.

### **Care-related policy provisions**

Specific care-related policy interventions can be broadly categorized into three areas: time, financial resources and services.

- While *paid care leaves* (such as parental leave) provide caregivers with some time and resources to care for dependants, they rarely reach workers who are informally employed; they can also reinforce caregiving as women's work if they are restricted to female workers (as is the case in many countries). In Argentina, for example, the law that stipulates a three-month maternity leave at 100 per cent wage replacement applies to only half of the female workforce.
- *Cash transfers* can assist families financially with the cost of bringing up children. However, where transfers are targeted to mothers and made conditional (children undergoing regular health checks, mothers attending workshops on nutrition) they can add to the already heavy workloads of poor women without involving men in such work.
- The provision of accessible and affordable *care services* (public crèches, preschools) can give unpaid carers the option of engaging in other activities, including income-earning, while ensuring a level of care and safety for their dependants. If done properly, investment in preschool and childcare services can generate new employment opportunities, free up women's time for participation in the paid economy and yield future returns in terms of child development.

### **Provision of care services in developing countries**

Many developing countries, especially middle-income ones, putting in place care services face the challenge of expanding coverage in ways that do not reproduce existing inequalities. While higher income households usually have a range of options, such as private childcare and hiring domestic workers, the ability of lower income households to purchase care is limited. Pluralism of service provisioning can thus slip into fragmentation as gaps are filled by providers offering services of varying quality and catering to different segments of the population. An effective and equitable mix of public and private provision demands a fairly capable state that can regulate market and not-for-profit providers. Yet a public-private mix is often advocated in contexts where such capacity is weak.

In many lower income countries care services tend to be inadequate. However, some of the infrastructure for providing these services may already be in place. Examples include the crèche-nutrition units (*anganwadis*) in India, the childcare centres in Nicaragua, or the Home-Based Care programme in Tanzania. Yet public financing of these schemes is extremely low, and their reliance on very low-paid and "voluntary" work is not supported by adequate training and resources.

### **The feminization of market and public sector care services**

Care work includes numerous occupations that differ significantly in terms of status and skills (from medical doctors to domestic workers). Although wages and working conditions of care workers vary across the spectrum and across countries, commodified forms of care share two salient features: they are overwhelmingly staffed by women, and the workers, regardless of gender, often face wage discrimination vis-à-vis workers with

comparable skill levels in non-care-related occupations—a so-called care penalty. Generally, this penalty is higher in countries with greater income inequality, less centralized bargaining through unions and a smaller public sector.

Much poorly paid care takes place in informal markets. Domestic workers, for example, make up a large share of female employment in many lower and middle-income countries. Many of them are still excluded from formal labour regulations on minimum wage, maximum working hours or mandatory employer contributions. The heavy reliance of even public social services and programmes on what is invariably labelled “voluntary” or “community” work is another cause for concern. This is very often shorthand for unpaid or underpaid work.

#### **Box 9.2 The public-private mix in Argentina and the Republic of Korea**

Class and regional differences in access to pre-school education for five-year-olds have been reduced substantially in Argentina by making enrolment mandatory for this age group. However, enrolment rates for children from lower income households remain only a fraction of those of children from higher income households in the younger age groups, where public provision is limited and the market plays a dominant role. Since low-income families cannot afford private childcare, they face long waiting lists for public crèches, rely on less professionalized community services or on unpaid care by family members.

In the Republic of Korea—where the state partially finances and regulates, but does not necessarily deliver, childcare services—the private-public mix does not seem to reinforce social inequalities in the same way. Government subsidies are on a sliding scale based on parents' income and paid directly to the institution where the child is enrolled. Hence, the same institution may be frequented by children from low- and high-income strata, with the participation of those from lower income families subsidized by the state.

#### ***The challenge of relying on “voluntarism”***

Community participation in social programmes aimed at orphans, people living with HIV and AIDS, and children in poor communities frequently means a reliance on the unpaid or underpaid work of women who are themselves very often among the poor. Although the monetary cost of social programmes is thereby reduced, it is questionable whether this volunteer support is appropriate in a context where families, especially women, already face multiple demands on their time. It is also not clear what “voluntarism” means in a context where poverty is extensive and/or unemployment high, or when access to the few services available is conditional on “voluntary” work.

The home-based care programmes that have mushroomed in the context of the HIV and AIDS pandemic across sub-Saharan Africa illustrate this problem. These programmes are standing in for public health services that—after years of neglect and underfunding—cannot meet the surge in demand. Yet the fact that these programmes are being rolled out in a context of stress and scarcity, without adequate funding and training, risks displacing care responsibilities onto unresourced “communities” (that is, local women), “volunteers” who are in reality very often underpaid employees, and unpaid carers in households (again, very often, women and girls).

### **Policy Lessons**

A policy environment that recognizes and values care as the bedrock of social and economic development has to respect the rights and needs of both caregivers and care-receivers. In such a context care-receivers would have universal and affordable access to care, as well as choice and control over how any help or assistance necessary to facilitate their independence is provided. Unpaid caregivers would be able to care in ways that

strengthen the well-being and capabilities of the ones they care for without jeopardizing their own economic security. And caregiving would become a real option, with adequate recognition and reward.

While concrete policy options are country- and context-specific, a number of policy priorities can be identified, guided by these principles.

#### *Invest in infrastructure and basic social services*

Investment in infrastructure (water, sanitation, electricity) in low-income countries can significantly increase the efficiency of unpaid domestic work. The availability of basic social services (primary education, health) enhances the well-being and capabilities of service users and reduces the time that family members allocate to those tasks. Both types of investment allow people more time for other pursuits (self-care, education, political participation, paid work) and are therefore an important priority.

#### *Ensure an adequate and reliable source of income*

In addition to time, caregiving also requires a reliable and adequate source of income with which to access the inputs (food, housing, transport) for a decent standard of living. This can be achieved through paid work and through appropriate social transfers (pensions, child/family allowances). The latter are particularly important in contexts where caregiving absorbs a significant amount of time.

#### *Create synergies between social transfers and social services*

Pensions and child/family allowances complement, but cannot substitute for, quality and accessible care services. The state has an important role to play in financing, regulating and providing care services. This is increasingly recognized in the area of childcare, where the challenge is to expand coverage in ways that reduce class and regional inequalities. One or two years of mandatory preschool can be an effective step in this direction. Policy debates on care for the elderly, on the other hand, often focus on financial issues, such as pensions. Meanwhile, the need for practical support in carrying out daily activities and the demand for long-term physical care are often neglected. In many countries these are now urgent issues requiring policy attention.

#### *Build on existing programmes to cover care needs*

Low-income countries can build on existing social care programmes. The expansion of child nutrition centres into quality pre-school/educational centres with wider coverage, or support for community-based health programmes through training, and resources for meals, transport and medical kits, can help provide better working conditions and improve the quality of care.

#### *Recognize care workers and guarantee their rights*

Policy makers must lead the shift from a strategy that relies on market and voluntary provision of care that is of the most informal and exploitative kind, to one that nurtures professional, decently paid and compassionate forms of care. This requires effective regulation and monitoring by states. Organizations of care workers and of care users also need to be involved in order to build public confidence in such services and sustain their financing through general taxation. Non-profit organizations and civil society associations play an increasingly important role in the delivery of care services. It is the duty of the

state to create clear standards on the rights of volunteers (health and safety at work, regular stipends) and to recognize them as workers given their growing numbers in the care workforce.

### *Make care more visible in statistics and public debates*

Care has important features of a public good whose contribution to economic growth, social development and social cohesion extends far beyond the individual care recipient. The costs of care must therefore be more evenly distributed among all members of society. In order to increase policy support for caregivers and care-receivers, care must emerge from the private realm and become a public issue. An important step in this direction is to make care work more visible through statistics as well as in public debates. Timely and regular indicators, such as those provided by time use surveys, are needed in order to monitor policy effectiveness in reducing and equalizing care burdens.

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## **PART II**

# **ENGENDERING CHANGE: AGENCY, STRATEGY, EMPOWERMENT**

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## Chapter 10

# Women in Popular Movements: India and Thailand during the Decade for Women<sup>1</sup>

*Gail Omvedt*<sup>2</sup>

(1986)

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### Introduction

#### ***The dialectics of participation***

After the Second World War, the new states that emerged in the Third World offered great participatory promises. A few of these states established democratic parliamentary political structures; others had Marxist regimes claiming to be uprooting the foundations of much of the traditional forms of exploitation and domination and to be upholding the interests of the working class. All of these states claimed some form of populist legitimacy and a large majority provided structures that institutionalized, at least for a period of time, some forms of popular participation, ranging from parties and unions to various forms of “local self-government”. And all of them opted for economic “development”, industrialization and “modernization”, which were supposed to provide the material basis for popular advancement.

After two decades—dubbed “decades of development” by most of the official institutions in these states—it has, however, been the “counter-participatory” rather than participatory structures that have become dominant. Limited or uneven (though often quite impressive) industrialization has brought with it large-scale marginalization of significant population sectors, while in numerous cases state repression has overshadowed the various democratic promises. “Popular participation” has therefore emerged more often than not as an *oppositional* force. The main dialectic of participation has not so much been one of governments fostering the democratic self-expression of various sectors

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<sup>1</sup> Originally published as an UNRISD monograph (UNRISD, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing, Gail Omvedt was living in India and had been engaged in research, teaching and other activities in support of women’s movements.

of their citizenship and developing policies accordingly, but rather one of popular movements creating new political structures (parties and states) that, over time, turn out to be repressive and counter-participatory. Finally, this development gives rise to new political movements—though often on a more unstable, ideologically unclear basis.

The new movements of popular participation (“new social movements”) do themselves have a history—a dialectic. They are a result of the interaction between two main social forces, namely, the drive for survival and self-determination of those sectors of the population least politically represented by the new regimes and the drive for real participation on the part of the educated who are excluded from real power by increasingly repressive regimes. Both the working sector and the middle-class intellectuals have been involved in all the new movements, and the dialectic of their interaction has been decisive. Intellectuals (mostly students and youth who have moved into the middle class often from poor families) have given their own vision and ideological direction to movements; this ideological leadership has responded to and in turn shaped the issues raised and the directions taken by the people in question. New sectors of the population have been mobilized—especially with regard to new identities for existing ethnic, religious and caste systems, and to such issues as land, ecology, science and health. Many of these trends have been international and forces acting from the international level have also conditioned the direction of movements and in turn been shaped by them.

Women’s participation is a case in point. Historically, the participation of women in mass movements, women’s organizations and movements on women’s issues has existed in most of these countries. Yet in many ways the post-1975 women’s movements have emerged as a new force. The influence of women’s liberation in the industrialized countries and the legitimizing force (and, not insignificantly, funds) resulting from such events as International Women’s Year (IWY) and the United Nations Decade for Women have played an important role in motivating women’s participation. Movements in developing countries such as India have witnessed an interaction between the more articulate and more easily organizable urban, middle-class women and the agricultural labourer or poor peasant women. Although international forces have provided ideological stimulation and funding and urban intellectual women have dominated such organizations, it has often been the case that some of the most radical and important issues have been brought forward by the movements of poor women. The increasing specificity and radicalism of the resolutions presented in the conferences held during Decade for Women reflect not only the findings of the growing international establishment but also the expression of new energies released by women in many societies. For them, these resolutions remain at the level of unfulfilled promises but the promises have now become more realizable.

### ***Patterns of participation***

The recent developments in women’s participation in India and Thailand show some interesting parallels—in spite of vast differences in their traditional social formations—in their experience of Western colonialism and in the way they have been integrated into the world capitalist system today.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This chapter is based on a fair degree of participant knowledge of India but only a superficial acquaintance with Thai society. In many ways the societies seem incomparable—Thailand is more the size of one of the linguistic states within India, while the whole of South-East Asia as a cultural area can be more closely compared to South Asia as a whole. However, India does have both a political and a socioeconomic unity (defined partly in terms of the caste system) that makes it possible to talk about it as a unit. However, this inevitably means a neglect of a great many diversities and

- i. In both countries, the opening of the Decade for Women in 1976 seems to coincide with a kind of “participation explosion” that ultimately culminates in a clampdown by the ruling regime. In India, a rising crescendo of mass movements can be traced from 1967 onward, led by a growing force of opposition parties (communists on the one hand and socialists and the bourgeois opposition on the other, whose coming together would result in the formation of the Janata Party in 1977) and ending finally with the imposition of Emergency by Indira Gandhi in the middle of 1975. In Thailand, the “democratic period” of 1973–1976 also has its roots in the rising turmoil and contradictions of the preceding decade and ends with the coup and clampdown of 1976.

In both cases, this first period is one in which mass movements seem to erupt in fairly “traditional” class (that is, economic) forms: working class strikes, peasant movements for land and agricultural labour organizations (India), anti-price rise movements and anti-famine agitation. These movements appear to take place primarily under traditional left party leadership: in India, the two major communist parties, the Communist Party of India (CPI), and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM or CPI(M)), together with socialists, appear in the forefront. In Thailand the emergence of a new open socialist party and the growing clandestine involvement of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), which up to that time had only guerrilla bases in the far corners of the country, made the unrest of students, workers and peasants appear highly threatening.

Yet such apparently conventional class and party forms of participation hide the birth of some new trends. For example, in India, this is seen first in the agitation within the conventional communist movement (the upsurge of the Naxalite movement,<sup>4</sup> which still remains a political force in spite of an attempt to crush it in 1970–1971), and in the emergence of the first “post-traditional” socialist and Marxist groups (Magowa and Yukrand in Maharashtra, Chhatra Yuva Sangarsh Vahini in Bihar); and second with the birth in 1971–1973 of the first new radical untouchable organization (Dalit Panther), the first militant tribal organization (Jharkhand Mukti Morcha) and the first ecology movement (Chipko movement).<sup>5</sup> These are all markers for the future, though not clearly noted at the time.

The participation of women in militant social movements during this period establishes the basis for new women’s groups, which are motivated by the growing consciousness of the oppression of women. In India, in the middle of the Emergency, IWY gives birth to the new women’s liberation movement.

- ii. The second period, roughly 1977–1980, begins with mixed trends: both in India and in Thailand, disillusionment with the regime as a result of the 1975–1976 repression sparks a burst of energy in the existing left parties. In Thailand, thousands of disillusioned youth and intellectuals flee to the jungle to join the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) or the new socialist–CPT united front, an active guerrilla insurgency that seems to be one of the strongest in the world. In India, the CPI(M)—the larger of the two traditional communist parties—emerges in the post-Emergency period as a viable “third alternative” to both the former ruling Congress Party and the “new” Janata Party, but quickly proves to be as repressive as and perhaps more disorganized than its predecessor. Heading governments in three states, with large and fairly militant organizations, the CPI(M) attracted many

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complications that cannot be analysed here. The main barrier for analysing the Thailand material is my lack of familiarity with the language and culture; as a result the processes outlined here can only be taken as suggestive with the hope that this will stimulate further research among Thai and Thai-speaking scholars. There is also a great disparity in available material; not only has there been more movement activity concerning women’s participation in India as compared to Thailand, but there is also more documentation on this subject (in English as well as in regional languages that are partly accessible to me in the case of India, not at all in the case of Thailand) as well as many more research studies.

<sup>4</sup> Naxalites are far-left radical communists associated with the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (CPI(ML)) and supportive of Maoist ideology.

<sup>5</sup> “First” only in a sense, for all have roots in the past—in the Ambedkarite movement, the Jharkhand Party and the forest struggles during the colonial period.

radicals, especially after the apparent crushing of Naxalite forces.

By the time this period ends in 1979–1980, what is strikingly evident is the failure of the traditional left alternative. In Thailand this is quite dramatic, with the near disintegration of the CPT resulting from internal dissension, state military pressure and the murderous divisions in the “international communist movement” which, moreover, deprived the CPT of its Laotian bases. In India, less violent but equally telling is the inability of the CPI-CPM forces to stem Indira Gandhi’s comeback in January 1980 and their failure to adequately respond to or lead new oppositional movements based on nationality (Assam, etc.), new agrarian contradictions (the farmers’ movement; and rural poor/rich farmer contradictions) or to generate new social identities.

In retrospect this period can be described as having engendered new social movements. In India, this was seen most dramatically with the problem of caste and with the rise of “atrocities against Harijans (Untouchables)” on the one hand and of new militant Dalit<sup>6</sup> organizations on the other. The slogan “Will the caste war turn into a class war?” practically replaced the more “classic” one “Will the green revolution turn into a red one?”. But tribal movements continue to grow, new democratic rights organizations and street theatre/cultural groups emerge and, finally, for the first time self-consciously identified feminist groups appear on the scene.

iii. The third period, 1980–1985, highlights the reconsolidation of bourgeois state power—this time using an ideology that increasingly appealed to religious-national chauvinism in contrast to the relative populism of the earlier period (at least in India). It is also the period of the new social movements. In India, while the traditional left parties remain a significant force (there is also a renewal of Naxalite organizing, although it is greatly fractionalized), it is quite clear by the 1984–1985 elections that these parties are a stagnant political force, since activists, usually ex-party members, often work in a number of semi-organized, non-party collectives of varying political ambitions. This—together with Dalit, tribal and growing numbers of women’s groups—coincides with a rise in people’s science movements, health and drug organizing, communal movements, awareness of the ecology and an increase in agitations centred around interdependent issues. That the term “new social movements” does not simply mean non-working class movements is underlined by the fact that developments within the working class go beyond traditional party lines. For example, mine workers organizing under unorthodox Marxist leadership and uniting “over” issues concerning tribal peasant groups such as Jharkhand Mukti Morcha and Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha; or an 18-month strike of a quarter million Bombay textile workers taking place under a rebel congress union leadership and associating itself in some areas with the movements of the rural poor.

In Thailand, a repressive political regime leaves less scope for open organizing, but new issues such as drugs and medicine are coming into focus, even among the peasantry, and ongoing ideological concerns about the nature of party democracy and indigenous cultural traditions are making an impact here as in India. In both these countries, political events in Nicaragua and in Poland have had a stimulating impact on the more politically conscious and critical youth and workers.

This is the context, then, for the rising wave of the new women’s movement—and for the growing, self-determined participation of women in these movements—in the last half of the Decade for Women.

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<sup>6</sup> The Untouchables refer to themselves as Dalits, meaning “the oppressed”.

## India

### ***Traditional patriarchal (anti-participatory) structures***

South Asia is the site of one of the world's oldest civilizations. For its women, this has meant subjugation to a particularly virulent form of caste-linked, state-backed patriarchy at least 4,500 years old. Throughout most of the subcontinent (exceptions are the matrilineal systems of the Nayars and related castes in Kerala), the system of kinship has been rigorously patrilinear and patrilocal; the institutionalization of the caste system has meant that girls become "counters" in the game of expressing and maintaining the purity of a caste: *roti-beti vyavahar*, or "trade in bread and daughters", is a common expression used in caste-linked exchanges. The seclusion of and controls placed upon women are inherent in the system, something that is best described by Manu's dictum "as a child under the control of her father, as an adult under her husband, when old under her son, a woman must never be independent". This expresses the fact that "high caste standards" mean greater control over women and their seclusion in the home. The extent to which these standards have been internalized may have varied, since lower castes allowed women the greater independence necessary to their labour. However, there remain the traditions that allow for child marriage, patriliney, dowry deaths, etc. Customs of androgyny, matriliney, female power (Shakti) and sexual expression as a way to liberation (tantrism) existed only at the ideological level; the cultural reality for most Indian women remained that of the *patriivrata*, husband-worshipping Sita.

Even tribal groups within India have in their own way been part of this structure. On the north-eastern border some tribes like the Garos and Khasis still maintain matrilineal traditions, but the large internal tribes—the Bhils, Gonds, Hos, Santals, Mundas—all appear to have patrilinear, patrilocal forms in spite of the fact that some of these are related to the Khasis and to South-East Asian people with bilateral/matrilineal kinship systems. However, they differ from caste Hindus in that they give girls greater sexual freedom before marriage and in that, in these groups as well as in many lower castes, women's economic role allows for more independence.

The fact remains that still today, throughout most of the subcontinent, boys, not girls, are the ritual and economic heirs. Men are heads of the households and the primary economic earners (as well as the main performers of caste-linked occupations, which in other societies might be done by peasant women); and the actual social subordination of women is further carried into the language structure. Men invariably refer to their wives using the familiar form of address—a grammatical form also used for social inferiors—but wives refrain from speaking their husbands' names and refer to them using the respectful form. "Girls are not ours, they belong to other people" is a common village saying justifying the lesser education and the inevitable differential treatment of daughters within the society.

India's integration into the world economy, via colonialism and later as an independent state, has merely changed some of the forms of this traditional patriarchy and introduced contradictions into it without substantially weakening it. Although the colonial period set in motion women's education, it actually reinforced some of their "legal" subordination, for in spite of introducing "bourgeois" law in certain social spheres the British raj continued to enforce separate "personal laws" for Hindus, Muslims and Christians. This meant enforcing the brahmanic codes that deny women the right to property inheritance and divorce, as well as Muslim shariat law and a version of "Christian"

law that gave women only limited rights. Here the bourgeois separation of the public and private spheres meant the maintenance of caste-patriarchal traditions in the home.

Social movements in the colonial period challenged the traditional subordination of women, raising such issues as remarriage for widows, education of girls and eventually, with the All India Women's Conference (AIWC), taking up the demand for reform of personal laws. But most of the "social reform" movements remained within the framework of a Hindu revivalism that continued to emphasize the Sita ideal and sought only to institutionalize an updated family with an educated wife/mother who would be an appropriate member of a Hindu bourgeois family. Militant anti-caste movements such as Periyar's Self-Respect Movement in Tamil Nadu and Phule's Satyashodhak movement in Maharashtra often had racial and even feminist components, but these groups had little overall impact. Similarly, the nationalist movement, under a revivalist Gandhian ideology, brought women to the streets and into mass demonstrations, even into *satyagrahas* (non-violent protests) and jails. It is noteworthy that the AIWC had to reject the advice of Gandhi and assert its autonomy from the Indian National Congress in taking up the issue of "Hindu code" reform. Communists and socialists have been organizing women since the 1940s—both within the AIWC and in independent organizations in some areas—and brought working class and peasant women into some kind of organized movement for the first time. It is ironical, however, that this left-organizing dealt mainly with reformist issues (toilets or other village facilities) or general class issues (unionizing women, bringing them into the "antifascist" struggle), while the upper-class and upper-caste members of the AIWC took up the cause of basic feminist economic issues (women's right to property) but only at the legal level. However, there was no coming together to produce a radical cultural and social challenge.

The final result produced a good deal of ambiguity in independent India. There followed significant legal reform, including the passing of a partially compromised "Hindu code bill", which gave the majority of women legal inheritance and divorce rights; there was also some recognition of working class women's rights, such as maternity benefits. Nevertheless these reforms remained mostly on paper. Maternity benefit laws were enforced only in large organized sector industries that were continuously retrenching women. With the general slaking of mass movements in the first two decades of "development", the AIWC became inactive and the communist-led National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) remained primarily a middle-class organization in both cities and villages. State-sponsored *mahila mandals* ("women's clubs") were typically centred around sewing classes or meeting for religious social rituals that reaffirmed women's traditional family role.

In fact the very nature of post-colonial economic development had the effect of increasing the economic gap between men and women. The growing disparity between the "organized" and "unorganized" sector meant that some men (of the upper-middle castes and more "advanced" linguistic-national groups) received a favoured position, while the rest, including nearly all women, were marginalized in the unorganized sector. In India the unorganized sector, defined as that other than people in government employment and enterprises employing over 15 people, is estimated to include over 90 per cent of the population. Even in agriculture, modernization meant some decline in agricultural labour employment while "skilled" jobs such as tractor driving, contracting for planting sugarcane, etc. were taken over by men. As dairying, for example, became a modern industry women probably continued to care for the cows and buffaloes while the men took over the marketing of the milk and became employees in the dairy societies and

distributing networks. Even low-caste *chamar* men after moving to the cities would work their way up to apprenticeships and factory jobs while their wives were forced to continue the arduous and ill-paid task of sweeping.<sup>7</sup>

All of this had many consequences, one perhaps being the growing phenomenon of “dowry deaths”, which became an important issue for Indian women in 1975 and which serves as a major symbol for the brutalities afflicted on women. Dowry was not “traditional” everywhere; only the higher castes and feudal families paid dowries at marriage while a large majority of peasants, artisans and low castes followed a small bride-price system, with the price varying according to each woman’s value as a labourer. Today, dowry has spread nearly everywhere, even among landless agricultural labourers and unemployed slum boys with almost no job prospects. In the more affluent sectors, this practice has led to the murders of young brides by their in-laws who would like their sons to enter into a second marriage and thus inherit another dowry. Dowry deaths reflect the impact of uneven capitalist development within a rigid form of traditional patriarchy.

By 1974–1975, as a result of education and the developmental-participatory promises of the new Indian state, and against a background of growing class turmoil, after more than a century of social movements, these contradictions were hitting home.

### **Participation and capitalist development**

Movements that include the participation of women are not necessarily “women’s movements” but they do provide a basis for women to come forward into public life; they constitute some kind of force behind such issues as economic or religious oppression of women. The question, then, is which women’s movements, in which women participate, best raise these issues? Why should the movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s provide a material base for activities that the nationalist, working class and peasant movements of the 1920s–1940s could not, such as giving birth to a fundamental challenge to patriarchal structures—a movement increasingly defining itself as a women’s liberation movement, even a “feminist” one?

The answer lies not simply in the availability of new ideologies at the international level or in the spread of education, though these may be factors. More important is the fact that the late 1960s saw a rise not only in mass movements but also in movements that provided new features because the spread of capitalist relations in India was transforming the conditions under which people lived and releasing new forces into the political arena.

The development of capitalist relations in agriculture has changed the shape of “peasant movements” in the post-colonial period. Earlier, these movements tended to set the peasantry as a whole (rich, poor, landless) against landlords or the state. Even if these groups drew on the forces of the rural poor for their militancy, the organizational structures that were created (that is, *kisan sabhas*) were dominated by rich and middle peasants, or by the big tenants. In the post-colonial period, the main contradiction has

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<sup>7</sup> There is much literature on the issues discussed here. To mention just some of the highlights, for women’s movements and issues during the colonial period, see Matson Everett 1981; Minault 1981; Heimsath 1964; and K. Chattopadhyay 1983. On the anti-caste movements and their relevance to women, see Omvedt 1986 and Dietrich 1985. On the left movement, especially interesting is Chakravarty 1980. See also Kishwar 1976. For some interpretations of women and traditional caste society see Mies 1980a and Mukherji 1982; and for the formative period D. Chattopadhyay 1983 puts forward some provocative hypotheses. Some studies of recently developing inequalities include Mies 1980b, 1981; Karlekar 1982; Omvedt 1981; Sharma 1980. Finally, Government of India 1974 remains an indispensable source, as well as ongoing discussions, articles in the journal *Manushi* (which includes not only movement reports but also early versions of important studies by Indian women researchers) and *Samya Shakti*.

shifted quite thoroughly in India in a way that sets wage-earning labourers and poor peasants against an emerging class of *kulak*/capitalist farmers, who themselves originated from a cultivating peasant heritage, with middle peasants wavering between them. The significance of this, for women's participation, is that among the middle/rich peasants who dominated earlier movements, women are less economically active outside the home and more hemmed in by customs of caste status and emphasis on seclusion. In contrast, women among the rural poor are invariably important field workers and wage earners and are sometimes more active and militant in these struggles than the men. The rural turmoil of the 1966-1975 period in India was marked by such poor peasant revolts as the Naxalbari, the growing organization of agricultural labourers (for example, in Andhra, Punjab and elsewhere), and broad-scale anti-famine agitation of the rural poor (in Maharashtra). All of the revolts were notable for the participation and aggressive militancy of women.

At the same time, capital has spread to areas that were not so heavily invaded in the colonial period, in the form of road construction, commercial tree felling, large-scale dam projects, mining developments and factories, especially in forest and mountainous areas. The heavily tribal populations inhabiting these areas have been assaulted more than ever before and drawn into resistance. Here again this has meant an increased participation on the part of tribal women who are relatively freer from patriarchal restrictions and more economically independent in their communities. The classic example is the Chipko movement in which low-caste Himalayan peasants sought to stop tree-felling, initially under Gandhian leadership but now under a more radical youth leadership that is also fighting about issues of employment and alcoholism. The movement began in 1973; women's participation became significant two years later, since women were more intimately involved in the forest economy than the men, many of whom had migrated to the plains for jobs that were more closely tied up with the commercial economy. Thus, the movement not only brought peasants into conflict with the state (that is, the forest department) and contractors, but in some cases also brought women into conflict with the men from their own communities.

Finally, the increased migration of the rural poor, who were thrown out of insufficiently productive village lands, and thus forced to find new jobs, has had numerous though largely undocumented consequences. The total of female-headed families is estimated at one-quarter to one-third for the Third World as a whole; India, the classic example of stable patrilinear and joint family structures, provides no clear statistics as far as the author knows, but a recent survey of two irrigated villages quotes a figure of 9 per cent for female-headed families, which must be relatively higher for the dry zone (Omvedt 1981). Much of this is due to the migration of men who frequently desert or divorce their wives. The aged are thus left without the security the joint family provides. Even where the entire family migrates for work women may be in a different position vis-à-vis their husbands. All of this puts new strains on the "traditional" family and in some respects shakes its foundations. This situation gives rise to a group of urban and rural women who remain outside any firm family structures and are available for mobilization in new movements.

To all of this must be added the spread of education, which reaches growing numbers of people from genuinely poor and low-caste backgrounds, and which places new pressures on middle- and lower-middle-class women. During the colonial period there was little contact between educated, upper-class women and urban or rural working women, in spite of the fact that small groups of educated leftist women went out to



organize the latter. Now in the post-colonial period, the gap is not so great and there are more natural links between educated and working women; there is a more spontaneous coming together and, as a result, greater ferment.

### **1975 and after: The new women's movement**

At this point, we can outline the development of the new women's liberation movement from 1975 onward, and then examine some important issues of organizing in order to trace the effects of what has been described earlier as the "dialectics of participation".

The year 1974 was, in a crucial sense, a beginning. At one level, it saw the publication of the Report of the Commission on the Status of Women, which quite thoroughly and devastatingly documented the low and even declining status of women in India. At another level, the first of the "new" women's organizations appeared, the Progressive Organization of Women (POW) in Hyderabad, which was made up of students connected with Naxalite student groups but which organized on their own and without "party" direction. The POW worked in Hyderabad and district colleges against dowry and "eve-teasing" (male harassment of women), and mobilized some slum women in marches against price rises. Its manifesto stressed both the cultural and economic subordination of women.

By 1975, the western state of Maharashtra was playing a leading role in women's movements. The background was the heavy involvement of rural women in anti-famine agitation from 1971 to 1973, which was followed by a strong anti-price rise movement based on urban middle-class and working-class housewives mobilized by a coalition of the socialist and communist women leadership. Also in Maharashtra, some left-leaning, "post-traditional", youth-based organizations were emerging from the communist, socialist and Dalit movements; these new groups were primarily engaged in organizing work in certain areas and the effect of this organizing—for instance of tribal men and women labourers in the Dhule district—was felt on the development of the women's movement.

In January, the Purogami Stri Sanghatana (PSS) was formed in Pune. It was sparked, in part, by the Hyderabad POW influence, but was made up of a different political mix, such as women connected with Magowa (a new Marxist group), with the Lal Nishan Party (a local communist party with a strong trade union base in rural and urban areas), with a Naxalite-oriented student group and with independents. The organization, together with the CPI women's front, held perhaps the first "international women's day" march in India on 8 March 1985. The whole year witnessed an upsurge of activity in district towns and in villages all over the state, and in October a Samyukta Stri Mukti Sangarsh Parishad (United Women's Liberation Struggle Conference) was organized in Pune, not by the PSS itself but by a very similar coalition. This conference was attended by over 700 women from all over the state—ranging from agricultural labourers and city sweepers to bank employees, nurses and students—and had at least some participation by women from all the political currents of the left. The dynamism it expressed and the enthusiastic response it received from the women who participated helped to catalyse women's organizing everywhere. The "communications committee" set up after the conference later became the Stri Mukti Andolan Samiti (Women's Liberation Movement Committee), a "united front" alliance with representation from all types of women's groups that manages to hold regular meetings to formulate programmes for at least one or two united campaigns each year. The existence of this committee probably makes Maharashtra unique, for nowhere else in India do the party-linked women's groups, the few feminist groups and semi-affiliated groups manage to come together on anything

other than an ad hoc basis. The Andolan Samiti has been a forum for debate, with ups and downs in terms of the various political currents influencing it, but it has remained an important platform for united action.

The final major event of 1975 was the All-India Conference on Women, organized in Trivandrum by the Indian School of Social Sciences, a CPM-affiliated institute. This contrasted with the Pune conference (where men were excluded from the premises even though they had helped to mobilize female participants) in several ways. First, there was a significant involvement of men; second, working-class women played a more peripheral role; and, third, the degree of party domination over several days of guided group discussion and resolution passing was considerably greater. Nevertheless, it also gave rise to an upsurge of women and impetus for new organizing, this time on a national scale.

Following the end of the Emergency, there began a period of localized but vigorous organizational growth, including, for the first time, the birth of a fairly self-conscious feminist trend. In Bombay, the Stri Mukti Sanghatana had emerged as a coalition of Lal Nishan Party-connected women, among others, who organized for the Pune conference, and thereafter continued to work actively in the cultural field. To this day, the group represents a tension between traditional Marxist and radical feminist tendencies. Another important movement was the Socialist Women's Group with Trotskyite leanings, which began to debate issues such as the role of domestic labour, to hold study groups and conferences, and to take part in slum women's mobilization, as well as working with women in small factories; by 1978, this group converted itself into the Feminist Network. Delhi produced Stri Sangarsh, a broad coalition working on issues like dowry deaths, and *Manushi*, a magazine that quickly became an informal organ for the growing women's movement in India. In Pune, the Purogami Stri Sanghatana gave rise to *Bayza*, a Marathi magazine that has continued to be published although the organization itself has withered away.

In Hyderabad, the POW disappeared after heavy police repression during the Emergency, but many women connected with it later formed the Stri Shakti Sanghatana, an organization that is both more feminist and more "autonomous" than its predecessor (one of the criticisms its organizers had of the POW was its close "party ties"), but that still remains in sympathetic alliance with the Naxalite movement. In Bangalore, Vimochana emerged as an organization connected with an active NGO known as the Centre for Informal Education and Development Studies (CIEDS), while the Working Women's Coordination was a local CPM-connected group. In time, this organizational outburst spread to practically every state capital and to a number of district towns. Significantly, the "Left" Centre of Calcutta saw very little women's organizational activity; new groups began to form only after about 1980; by 1984 they had come together in a loose alliance, although the CPM- and CPI-connected women's organizations remained separate.

During the post-1975 period, party-affiliated women's organizations also expanded. The National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) had been formed in 1954 as an Indian affiliate of the Women's International Democratic Federation; following the split in the AIWC, it remained under the leadership of the CPI but included some prominent non-party women. Following the 1964 CPI-CPM party split, the CPM did not form a national women's organization—indicating the low priority given to this type of activity—although it continued to have some large state-level organizations. There was some debate in the party about whether a women's organization should be made up primarily of "toiling women" or all women (indicating an "alliance with the bourgeoisie") and for

some time after 1975 CPM women worked in an All-India Working Women's Coordination Committee. Finally, however, a national organization known as the Democratic Women's Federation was formed and state units were affiliated with this. Both party-linked groups had significant membership and activity in the rural areas and among working class women, though it is difficult to evaluate the nature of this work; their mass membership far surpassed that of the newer women's organizations described above, yet the number of actual activists and extent of mobilization was often not much different. These party-connected groups also began new, small bulletin publishing efforts in various languages.

CPI(ML) organizations did not form affiliated women's groups, with the exception, curiously, of those considered on the far "left" and "right" of the trend—the SNS<sup>8</sup>-linked CPI(ML) formed a women's organization in Assam, and women connected with the Hindustan Ghadar Party organized a Purogami Mahila Sanghatana in Bombay in 1981.<sup>9</sup> The socialists did not survive as a separate party after their merger with Janata in 1977 and apparently do not have a separate national women's organization, but socialist activists work in different state-level organizations (founded earlier) as well as in some new, semi-affiliated groups such as the Nari Samta Manch, which was organized in Pune after 1980.

This organizational expansion has continued and will probably continue in the future. The year 1980, however, can be considered to be an important dividing line in the new women's movement in India. During this year, vast nation-wide mobilizations took place on the issue of rape, particularly in connection with the Mathura case, which made it clear that the women's movement was no longer a small effort but a central feature of Indian politics. Whether or not it could succeed in shaking the foundations of oppression remained to be seen but at least it was emerging as a serious social and political force.<sup>10</sup> Following this, one can see a growth of new, non-party women's organizations in *rural* areas, among poor peasant and agricultural women labourers (usually tribals or Dalits) linked to broader class organizations, as well as new organization on some of the most fundamental issues affecting working women. The issues of rape, land rights and the formation of rural women's organizations all represent a qualitative step forward in the women's movement and will be discussed separately, since they illustrate some fundamental features of women and participation. One point that should be added, however, is that the last half of the decade also saw a significant input of funding from international sources for women's activities. This has helped to promote the growth of women's studies and research activity (it may be noted that women activists belonging to various political trends, including feminist and traditional Marxist, have benefited from this); the growth of urban-based women's organizations including those linked to left parties (for example, Annapurna in Bombay), those carrying on unionizing efforts within a left-Gandhian framework (SEWA—Self Employed Women's Association—in Ahmedabad and Delhi, for example), and those organizing women's centres for

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<sup>8</sup> Satyanarayan Singh—commonly known as SNS—was one of the early leaders of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist).

<sup>9</sup> By 1985–1986 more such groups were visible. A big step forward was taken when one of the largest CPI(ML)-connected organizations, the Indian People's Front (IPF), held an All India Women's Conference in April 1986, reaching out significantly to feminist groups. This represented a growth in women's participation in mass work and in an earlier formation of IPF-linked women's groups in villages and cities in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Bengal.

<sup>10</sup> One aspect of this has been the increased focus on women's issues in the cinema and other media, even if only in a sensationalist way.

refugee, legal and moral aid within a feminist framework (Saheli in Delhi and Women's Centre in Bombay); and the growth of organizations based in rural areas or small towns and connected with "action groups" or NGOs. Whether this funding has significantly affected the direction of the new women's movement or merely helped it to grow is an important question; however, this has been only a minor factor in the organizations and activities discussed here.

If we compare this new, post-1975 women's movement in India with the older pre-independence one, some crucial differences are revealed. There has emerged a fundamental challenge to many basic Hindu values regarding the family and society, and a radical questioning of the Sita ideal—in contrast to earlier tendencies to remain within a Hindu revivalist framework. There has been the growth of a self-consciously "feminist" trend, stressing autonomy of organization, asserting itself on cultural as well as economic issues and demanding change in the personal and family life of male activists as well as the public organization of women. This has also meant the questioning of some traditional, bureaucratized models of organization and the demand for more democratic practices. Finally, in contrast with earlier periods, most of the fundamental issues affecting women have at some point or another been taken up, ranging from massive mobilizations over the issue of sexual violence to the beginning of practical—not simply legal—struggles to give rural women land and property rights.

Yet even in 1975 most of this was hardly even anticipated. What is striking is that the new militancy and radicalism has come out of the dynamics of the movement itself and of the participation of large numbers of women from some of the most oppressed labouring sectors.

The 1975 conferences, for instance, were marked by a very strong *economistic* orientation, in a fairly narrow "trade union" sense. That is, while dependence within the family and cultural issues were discussed (the Pune conference even suggested men should share the housework), the causal stress was given to women's (lack of) "participation in social production"—that is, to issues of *employment*. The Pune conference resolution stated:

Today women generally are forced to remain dependent on the father, the husband, or the son. Therefore they don't have the strength to fight against harmful customs or traditions...Therefore, every woman should be able to participate in social production. To achieve that, sufficient employment should be made available in the economic system. (Translated from Marathi)

According to the Trivandrum conference:

Emancipation from the bonds of oppressive institutions, customs and inhibitions has...to begin with the end of economic exploitation. As long as women are regarded as only 'supplementary' or 'marginal' workers, they will continue to be 'expendable assets', and their rights and needs persistently ignored. (Social Scientist 1976:58)

Both conferences saw private property as the root of the socioeconomic system oppressing women and called for the socialization of the means of production, but, strikingly, this was never connected with women's lack of access to the means of production as defined by the kinship system. Similarly, violence within the family and sexual violence (such as rape) were not mentioned, although dowry deaths and the use of women's bodies as sex objects in advertising were.

This was the dominant perspective among almost all women involved in the 1975 period of mobilization (including, it should be mentioned, the author's). Even then, however, there were some minority voices, for instance a statement submitted by five

women attending the Trivandrum conference, which deemed that the role of the family and the importance of reproductive work should be stressed. Most interesting was the fact that several Dalit activists raised issues of opposing the family system more strongly than any of the other women involved. For instance a local newspaper argued on 8 March that for women to be liberated not only the property system but also the “entire family system” must be abolished! The sensitivity of these low castes to cultural and caste-kinship issues helped them take such stands even before a feminist trend was organized. The fact is that efforts to link issues of production/reproduction, economy/kinship (at both practical and theoretical levels) really began only after 1977 and developed as a result partly from the growth of feminist trends among certain sections of educated women and partly due to the involvement of wider sections of low-caste, tribal working class and rural poor women who made it very clear that economic exploitation, sexual violence and oppression (both within the family and by “class enemies”) were part of their lives and struggles.

The issue of “autonomy” or “autonomous women’s organizations” is one that has been brought forward quite strongly by feminists in the post-1980 period. The concept was not used at all in 1975. What was talked about was the issue of the democratic functioning of mass organizations, which should not simply be treated as a party “front”. Indeed, the issue of autonomy is a complex one in a country like India. There is an ambivalence about the relationship of the masses to their educated activists: on the one hand, there is an ongoing dependence on those who can more easily articulate issues and policies, handle paper work, negotiate with the establishment; on the other hand, there is a genuine drive for autonomous self-assertion. This ambivalence has not, as yet, led to the formation of grassroots movements separate from ideologically motivated middle-class participation and leadership. Rather, there has been an attempt on the part of mass organizations to draw away from rigid party controls and to abandon sectarian quarrels so as to achieve unity.

In the women’s movement, this has meant that most of the new “non-party” women’s organizations actually have one or a number of women in leadership roles with fairly specific political identities and commitments. It might be best to describe such organizations as “semi-affiliated” or “semi-autonomous”. If “autonomy” is taken in the narrow sense to define those who hold specific feminist ideas about women’s oppression or who do not believe in the need for any political party, then it would include very few movements in India. If it is understood in a broader sense as a continuous pressure from the masses and from some politically conscious individuals as a democratic functioning of mass organizations and mass movements as resistance to simply being made a tool of the party leadership and taking up issues relevant to women (such as wife-beating and women’s land rights) even if these go against the narrow immediate interests of men connected with parties or their other mass organizations, then it does describe a significant ongoing process of development. This process implies a major transformation in the nature and functioning of left political parties, but such implications are by no means as yet clear to people or very much realized in practice.

Therefore, the dynamics of the women’s movement has involved a change from a fairly conventional, party-led or dominated economic position to one that serves as a radical challenge to Hindu<sup>11</sup> cultural ideas and the traditional Indian kinship system. This movement deals with issues of women’s sexual and economic exploitation, asserts, in

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<sup>11</sup> A challenge to Muslim and Christian patterns is also taking place, only more slowly, and will not be dealt with here.

practice, varying degrees of organizational autonomy, and contains within it a feminist trend that carries with it not only specific ideas about women's oppression but also new concepts for radical change and for revolutionary political organization as such.<sup>12</sup> To see how this has developed as a result of the interaction of a newly stirring section of young, educated middle-class women with a growing militancy among the rural and urban poor, let us look in more detail at the three specific issues of rape, land rights and the formation of rural women's organizations.

### **Rape**

In 1972 a 15-year old tribal labourer named Mathura was raped by two policemen after her brother had lodged a complaint with them to prevent her from running off with a boy. The policemen were declared not guilty in a Sessions Court, guilty by the High Court when an appeal was made, and finally declared not guilty by the Supreme Court on the grounds that since no wounds were found on Mathura's body it could be presumed she had not resisted and thus had consented to sexual intercourse. It was a fairly typical instance of the victim being judged guilty, familiar in rape cases around the world and throughout history. But this time, when four university law teachers (two women and two men) wrote an open letter protesting the outcome of the case in 1979, it sparked a massive response throughout India. Protest marches and demonstrations were held calling for a reversal of the decision and for "justice for Mathura", meetings were held and resolutions passed in countless women's meetings in towns and even villages, and in Bombay women from a number of disparate and even feuding women's groups came together in 1980 to form the Forum Against Rape. The group began a vigorous process of organizing and taking up a number of local cases of rape and other attacks on women, and then in November 1980 sponsored a National Conference Against Oppression of Women which drew response and attendance from all the new and growing women's groups throughout the country—mostly socialist and feminist in composition. The reverberations of the mass mobilizations led to stormy scenes in parliament regarding cases of atrocities against women, to pressure for a new rape law (which was ultimately not very satisfactory) and to the emergence of a new cinema (including both the standard Hindu melodrama and more serious films) focusing on rape and women's oppression. Rape, the ultimate form of sexual violence against women, turned women's liberation into a national political issue.

In 1975, and for several years afterward, there was much discussion of "atrocities", of dowry deaths and of sexual exploitation (such as the use of women's bodies in advertising), but rape itself was considered too sensitive an issue to be a matter for public organizing—let alone mass mobilization.

Then why did this mobilization happen? In fact the whole issue of sexual violence touched a raw nerve for rural and urban working people alike that led to militant resistance in the turbulent post-Emergency period. It was the participation of men and women in massive resistance to state- and upper class-provoked brutalities that fed into a

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<sup>12</sup> This section and the following are based primarily on participant observation, interviews, and the use of a large number of documents (leaflets, booklets, resolutions, occasional publications) from the various organizations. In addition there are a large number of cyclostyled papers written for the different conferences during the decade which are gradually trickling into publication, while journals such as *Manushi*, *Bayja* (Marathi), *Mahila Andolan Patrika* (Marathi) and two important general left weeklies, *Economic and Political Weekly* and *Frontier* provide indispensable ongoing coverage. See also Omvedt 1980 for a Maharashtra-based description of 1975 organizing, and the special issue on women of the *Social Scientist* 1975 at the time of the Trivandrum Conference.

growing women's liberationist consciousness and organizing to produce the huge protests from 1980 onward.

There was, for example, the question of what might be called "landlord rape". One historical form of the subordination of communities of ex-untouchable agricultural labourers was the sexual right that members of the dominant village landholding castes held over their women with whom concubinal relationships frequently developed. The growing militancy and liberation struggles of these groups—and of all low-caste, tribal labouring and poor peasant communities—were aimed at ending this relationship, at breaking free from the "rights" of the landlords over low-caste women, and at restoring what people called their *izzat*, or "honour". Many struggles had taken place over this issue since the 1930s, but the widespread growth in the 1970s of low-caste assertion—Dalits, agricultural labourers—led, in turn, to intensified rural strife that was often caste-related. The process that newspapers described as "atrocities against Harijans" very often involved the murder of men and rape of women on the part of landowners attempting to repress the growing militancy of the rural poor. Even Naxalites organizing in the rural areas of places like Bihar found themselves fighting their main battles on issues not of land but of agricultural wages and sexual violence. In some cases Naxalite squads killed landlords or their goons who were most notorious for such brutalities; in other cases there was spontaneous resistance by the people themselves, with women at the forefront.

At the same time the growing brutality of the state machinery—police running amok in various ways—and of the often furious popular reaction to it marked the post-Emergency period. The Mathura case was not an exception; "police rape" seemed to be becoming a common fact of life and one that was interwoven with communal and caste contradictions. The Rameeza Bee case in March 1978 in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, in which a Muslim girl was raped by the police and the man with her killed, was a potent example; throughout the city students and slum-dwellers came together for nearly five days of violent protest that included the burning down of several police stations. Here Hindu-Muslim contradictions were also a factor, just as caste issues had played a role in the Mathura case (it is interesting that some small Dalit publications focused on the case about as quickly as women's groups did) and in most of the organizing around "landlord rape". Other cases of police rape—such as that of Shailaka in Bhongir (also in Andhra Pradesh) in September 1979 and of Maya Tyagi in June 1980—became almost equally notorious, stirring popular rage that is felt to this day.

With both police and landlord rape, class struggle and the struggle against sexual violence reinforced each other. But the growing consciousness of women's sexual oppression also helped to bring to light increasing cases of what might be called "family rape" or community rape—the rape of girls or women by the men who were closest to them. (In a sense this also has historical parallels: widowed and secluded Brahman women were sometimes prey for the men of their household, and when Jotiba Phule, the anti-caste social reformer, set up a small orphanage for the "children of Brahman widows" in the 19th century, this was taken by the local Brahman community not as a philanthropic act, but as a caste insult.) Significantly, there was no widespread mobilization around cases of "family rape"; but there was some growing consciousness of fighting injustice among many groups of women, and local women's organizations or small nuclei of women activists began to intervene more frequently in such cases.

However, while the burgeoning anti-rape mobilizations of 1980–1981 sparked women's consciousness and that of women's organizations, very serious ambiguities arose as far as women were concerned: organizing was often ineffective when it came to

concretely helping the victim, frequently controlled by men and approached from a male perspective; and in many ways it seemed to hamper rather than to promote women's participation. Anti-rape agitation did not so much give birth to women's organizing and women's self-determination but instead revealed the need for these.

It was a common experience of women in the early 1980s that, while they could frequently instigate a great public storm over a rape case and organize demonstrations and marches, they almost never had the kind of grassroots-based organization that could provide the kind of concrete material support needed to help a victim survive in her own home or her own community; nor did the trade unions or left parties that sometimes joined them in the agitation. Quite frequently meetings were held, a public issue was made of the case, pressure was brought to bear on the "authorities" and when it was all over there was only a woman, alone, stigmatized by her neighbours, an object of notoriety and shame now that the organizers had gone—and once again a potential kidnapping victim for some landlord. The Mathura case itself was a kind of paradigm for the whole process: all the mass agitations of 1980 demanding "justice for Mathura" had been undertaken without any of the organizers meeting Mathura herself or even knowing who she was. Some time after the whole issue had partly died down, an enterprising reporter hunted down the girl, now married, where she was living under a different name. Her husband and the neighbours had known nothing of the whole case; and it was only accidental that the organizing and publicity did not end by harming Mathura herself.

Even the smaller cases revealed the same lack of organizational efficacy; a girl from a middle peasant family in the Satara district (Maharashtra) was married to a boy from Bombay and gave birth to a child six months later. Upon questioning she revealed she had been raped by a local doctor. The baby was murdered. Her husband wanted to stay with his wife but they had no place to go in crowded Bombay apart from his family, which was orthodox. The girl was sent back to her village. Local women activists spent a couple of months searching for some kind of training/employment programme for the girl; this was also difficult since she had had only a few years of education. Tragically, before anything else could be done, she was poisoned by her own uncle in order to wipe out the "insult" to the family name.

Rape cases, in fact, lay bare the power structure of society and serve to impress upon women activists their own responsibility and organizational helplessness. One outcome of this was that a number of women in Bombay and Delhi decided to lend their energies to organizing and working with "women's centres" (Saheli in Delhi, Women's Centre in Bombay) that could provide concrete legal and material resources as well as extended counselling. But this did not solve the overall organizational problem, which was simply that strong women's organizations (or friendly class organizations) did not exist at the neighbourhood and village level, which was where they were most needed.

There were also serious consequences deriving from the fact that rape was *not* simply seen or taken up as a "women's issue". The negative side of the often massive involvement of lower class and lower caste men, as well as women, in these issues was that it reflected traditional, patriarchal ideas: the rape of "our" women was an insult to "our" family, "our" community, and the way to deal with it was to stop women from going out to work or out into the streets and to build the kind of middle-class (and brahmanic) family that protects and secludes women! Women working on rape cases with activists of Dalit and tribal communities found that even the most "progressive" organizations or committees dealt with the problem of rape and sexual harassment from such a perspective. As two women wrote regarding the police rape of tribal women:



Unfortunately, the role played by the leaders of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha in this context is one of furthering the process rather than impeding it: they talk of the need for making divorce more difficult to get, ensuring an uninterrupted monogamous family, etc. Their reasons for this are well-intentioned though dangerous: in a situation in which it is precisely the freedom of tribal women which has led to sexual exploitation...the leadership has seen no alternative but to turn to traditional morality and its social forms...Is not this attitude of reform one which contradicts the aim of the JMM, which is to create a tribal identity, a tribal resistance? (Kumar and Sadagopan 1980)

Naxalite organizations, while taking up issues of sexual violence and economic exploitation, frequently did so using “guerrilla” methods rather than through mass action in which there was genuine decision making on the part of both women and men. Instead, a small squad of (male) activists punished the offender—with the “people’s court” sometimes being simply a show—and thereby claimed credit for “protecting our women”. The fact was that although women’s anger motivated their energetic participation in many mobilizations, this participation often remained only at the physical level: in only a few cases were issues of sexual harassment dealt with by local women organizing themselves in a self-determining way.

The same can be said for what might be called “organizational rape”—sexual violence committed by the activists of a popular organization. As women’s consciousness grew, so did the demands that such instances should not simply be brushed aside by arguments of long-term organizational needs. Such cases did exist, although they rarely came to “public” light and were increasingly handled by organizations that took such forms of women’s oppression seriously. Even here, however, men controlled the decision making. In one case, an activist who had molested (not raped) a local woman was punished by permanent expulsion, but the decision was made by a small group of full-time activists in a secretive and bureaucratic way; the wishes of the victim herself were not really considered, and a local women’s group had no more say in the matter than any other section of the “masses”. Here, the outlook that “only we (the conscious vanguard of activists) can have a real women’s liberation perspective” worked to hinder women’s self-determination.

The pervasive reality, however, was the lack of a grassroots women’s organization strong enough to assert itself in all such cases. Here, again, the overall problems of mass dependency on more educated/articulate activists showed themselves. Local women—agricultural labourers, poor peasants, slum dwellers—were quite often bold and aggressive and ready for action, but without support from equally bold women activists they found it difficult to progress on their own. Furthermore, women activists (full time or part-time) were rare because of the very real social limits placed upon them, which made it much more difficult for young women than for young men to work in slums or villages. Here is an example of the potential dynamics of participation: the coming together of rebellious educated women and militant poor women could be a powerful tool, but the lack of this combination held back the development of the movement.

### ***Women and land rights***

The issue of access to the means of production (particularly land in the rural areas) is one in which class exploitation (in the narrow sense) and kinship are intertwined. A person’s access to land is determined both by the placement of his family within the broader structure of class exploitation and by the lines of authority within the family. For women, it obviously makes a difference not only whether they belong to a community that has greater or lesser access to property within the village, but also whether the family system is

predominantly matrilinear or patrilinear, matrilocal or patrilocal, and how much decision-making power they have within this system.

In India, single women are landless in a vast majority of cases.<sup>13</sup> Yet this fact has taken a long time to come into the consciousness of people involved with peasant movements or women's movements. The issue of women's land rights has been even more invisible than their "invisible work".

Until the last few years, the problem of making legal changes to give women inheritance rights and the problem of the role of women in practical struggles for land ownership have never been brought together. In the pre-independence period, women fought for changes in the Hindu "personal law" that would give them inheritance and divorce rights; eventually, they succeeded in having a reformed law passed. However, even though communist and socialist women were involved in demonstrations to support a reformed law about land rights, they were not cognizant of the fact that, in fighting to get land for landless families, the land would remain under the control of the male heads of the families. Kinship issues were seen as "narrow" and "sectional" in contrast to the "basic" question of the abolition of landlordism. Similarly, throughout most of the post-independence period, upgrading the legal inheritance rights of women was being discussed without much consideration for how they were to be implemented in practice.

The 1975 women's conferences in Pune and Trivandrum did not discuss women's land rights, even though their major focus concerned the needs of rural women. The question of land rights was not included in the recommendations of the UN-sponsored IWY conference in Mexico that year either. However, the 1979 World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (WCARRD) did take up the issue, which was later incorporated into the recommendations of the mid-decade conference in Copenhagen in July 1980. A high-level report on women in agricultural and rural development presented at the end of the year in India also dealt with this issue, but put greater emphasis on women's access to employment and other government services. Neither the feminist-sponsored National Conference on Women's Oppression in November 1980 nor the official National Conference on Women's Studies stressed the question. However, both the National Conference on Women and Development in May 1979 and a symposium of eight major women's groups<sup>14</sup> presenting "Development Imperatives" in September 1980 recommended that land appropriated through the implementation of land reform programmes be received in women's names, either jointly with their husbands' or separately.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, by mid-decade, the issue of women's land rights had moved into official consciousness. However, when it was taken up on a practical, organizational basis in 1982–1983, it was done so not by organizations connected with the above-mentioned

<sup>13</sup> Presented as evidence is the fact that in the two villages the author surveyed in 1980 there were three single women—divorced or deserted by their husbands and living in their maternal villages—who were working as landless labourers in spite of the fact that their brothers or uncles were rich farmers owning between 25 and 60 acres of land.

<sup>14</sup> These were the AIWC, the NFIW, the YWAC of India and YCCA of Delhi; the Indian Federation of University Women's Associations, the Janavadi Mahila Sarniti and the All India Coordination Committee of Working Women, and the Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS).

<sup>15</sup> See "Recommendations of the UN World Conference of International Women's Year" (Mexico City, Mexico, 19 June–2 July 1975), the "Report on the Conference on the Role of Women in Development" (Baghdad, Iraq, 6–13 May 1979), "Recommendations of the World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women" (Copenhagen, Denmark, 14–30 July 1980), "Recommendations of the Meeting of High Level Experts of Non-Aligned and other Developing Countries Concerned with the Role of Women in Development" (Havana, Cuba, 25–27 May 1981) and "Recommendations of the National Conference on Women and Development" (New Delhi, 19–21 May 1979) in CWDS (1983); Mazumdar et al. (1979); and SNDT Women's University (1981).

policy-formulating bodies but by newer “post-traditional” leftists and feminists. In three cases the problem was approached by people working with Dalit and *adivasi* (tribal) women, and the dynamic was not one of moving from considered policy recommendation to implementation, but rather one of the interaction between militants sensitive to the overall aspects of women’s (and low-caste) oppression and the movements of the base.<sup>16</sup>

The first case was that of the struggle led by the Chhatra Yuva Sangarsh Vahini (Student and Youth Struggle Force) in the Bodh Gaya district of Bihar. The Vahini was a Gandhian-Socialist youth organization, founded by Jayaprakash Narayan during the movement of 1974, that began to work in Bodh Gaya after 1977, taking up the struggle for land rights of landless Dalit labourers working for a large Hindu *math* (monastery-temple complex) with land scattered around dozens of villages. Bihar is one of the most inequalitarian caste-ridden and “semi-feudal” of the Indian states with little scope for independence even among poorer women; the fact that so fundamental an issue as land rights was taken up here resulted from the surging militance of the Dalit labourers (seen in the different forms of Naxalite-led struggles in the same state) together with the fact that, compared to most other rural organizations, the Vahini had a greater commitment to democratic practices and greater participation, apparently from the beginning, by young women activists. The labouring women’s militant participation in the struggle was evident, and by the late 1970s issues of drunkenness, wife-beating and the right of women to come out of the home for organizational meetings were also taken up. In 1980 the Vahini organized demonstrations over the rape case of Maya Tayagi, in which rural women joined urban protesters. On the question of giving importance to such issues, Vahini women in some cases had to confront male activists, but in any case the Vahini was becoming one of the “new” organizations in which social forms of equality of behaviour were stressed. Activists (including those from the peasantry) were expected to join together in cooking food and washing dishes, and a non-ritualized garlanding form of marriage was used.

In 1982 when the struggle was nearing victory in at least some parts of the land, a conference was held to determine how widespread the struggle had become. Initially, a policy was formulated similar to those produced in every land struggle in India up to that time: the land would preferably go to “landless agricultural labourers, poor peasants, widows, etc.” At this point the Dalit women themselves protested, emphasizing the “invisible” kinship relations: “If our men get the land they’ll only become more uppity and beat us more”. A heated and lengthy discussion ensued, in which the organization finally decided that the first bit of land should be put in the woman’s name. This policy probably had no precedent in India.

Land distribution has proceeded slowly since then, and by 1985 there were still only about three villages (out of over 200 in which the Vahini were working) where women owned land. The obstacles have been numerous, including resistance from male labourers, a reluctance on the part of male Vahini activists to push the issue and downright opposition from government officials who asked women who had been promised land, “If you get land are you going to leave your husband?”—a question that

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<sup>16</sup> The following is based on interviews and participant observation; for Sangarsh Vahini Manimala, see *Manushi* 1983; Chhatra Yuva Sangarsh Vahini (Student and Youth Struggle Force) 1985; for the Singhbhum case, see *Manushi* 1982 and Lutz 1983; on the Dhule organizations, see the various articles in *Satyashodhak Marxwadi* (Marathi publication of the Satyashodhak Communist Party); and Sathe and Omvedt 1983.

indicated their concept of family ties! With all of this, the Bodh Gaya struggle has repressed a crucial starting point in perhaps the most fundamental of all struggles of women to gain a real material basis for equal participation.

At about the same time, the issue of tribal women's rights to land began to arise. Unlike the Bodh Gaya women, who are Hindus and thus at least have legal rights to land ownership and inheritance, tribals in India are governed by customary laws that vary from place to place, but are normally patrilineal in terms of inheritance and give women only usufructory rights over their parental property. This long-standing situation, which once again had received little official attention, became an important issue following mass police rapes of Ho tribal women in the Singhbhum district of Bihar following a major jungle struggle and police firing in 1979. Women activists, who joined a civil liberties investigation committee, were shocked to find that tribal women raped by anyone from outside the community lose all social rights, including their existing rights to the use of land. Investigation also brought to the fore the problem of just how limited and patriarchal these "customary" rights were. In 1982, one of the investigators then joined two tribal women in filing a written petition in the Supreme Court challenging the whole "customary law", which is highly discriminatory against women, on the grounds of constitutionally guaranteed fundamental rights. This was the first of several petitions that began to use the fundamental rights clause to challenge the whole framework of different "personal laws" for members of different religious communities—something that has somewhat revolutionary legal implications.

However, this initial effort did not go very far. The women activists involved did not have a strong foothold in the local tribal movement; the movement itself was relatively fragmented in the Singhbhum district, and the biggest militant organization among the Ho-Munda-Santhal tribal groups in this part of India, the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, held negative opinions about the whole issue of women's oppression. Questioning *adivasi* customary law aroused further hostility and a few women connected with the tribal groups pointed out that even the reformed "Hindu law" remained overwhelmingly unimplemented and that without the participation of tribal women a mere legal effort was meaningless.

Such a move did develop, however, on the other side of India, in the Dhule district of Maharashtra. Here several organizations were working among Bhil tribals, who had a patrilineal-patrilocal structure giving more or less the same kind of limited rights to their women as the Hos of Bihar had. The most vigorous of these was the Shramik Sanghatana, a mass organization based on Bhil (but including other castes), poor peasants and agricultural labourers in four of the most capitalistically developed *talukas*<sup>17</sup> of the district. This was an organization with "new Marxist" leadership that had developed fairly vigorous and publicized women's participation and even a separate women's organization. By the early 1980s the Shramik Sanghatana was in a stage of partial political confusion with a number of activists joining the CPM while others at first remained unorganized and then joined a "post-traditional" communist organization, the Shramik Mukti Dal. The initiative on the land issue was taken up instead by another organization, the Satyashodhak Communist Party (SCP), working in two of the more forested and "backward" talukas of the same district.

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<sup>17</sup> A taluka is an administrative district.

The SCP was originally the district unit of the CPI and CPM, but its leaders had broken away from that party in 1977 as a result of disagreements over their handling of the caste issue. The SCP, which carries a quotation from Buddha on the cover of its programme booklet, was founded on the theme of combining the struggle of class and caste and of following a “Marxism-Phule-Ambedkarism” ideology (that is to say, combining Marxism with the philosophies of the two indigenous anti-caste leaders, Jyotirao Govindrao Phule and B.R. Ambedkar). When it was formed, the SCP converted its tribal mass organization, a branch of the CPM’s *kisan sabha* (peasants’ union), into the Satyashodhak Kashtakari Sabha, and its women’s organization, which had once been the strongest rural branch of the CPM’s state women’s group, into the Satyashodhak Kashtakari Mahila Sabha (SKMS). Apparently, from 1977 onward, there was pressure on the part of leading tribal women in this organization to put forest land won by the struggle in the names of women. However, no programme specifically for women was organized for several years, and it was only with general pressure from the women’s movement and with the influx into the SCP of a group of ex-socialist youth activists that the former combined “abolition of women’s oppression” as a priority theme with “abolition of caste oppression”.

The programme taken for this issue was the one-point demand “apply the Hindu Code Bill to *adivasi* women”. This was brought forward by the SCP in 1982–1983, but was immediately opposed by both feminist activists and activists connected with Shramik Sanghatana. It was felt that there was no reason to bring *adivasis* into a “Hindu” identity, that with regard to marriage and divorce *adivasi* customary laws were in advance of Hindu legal statutes, and that, in fact, the laws comprising the “Hindu Code Bill” had many flaws. Two *shibirs* (study camps) were held by the Shramik Sanghatana women’s organization in January and March of 1983 to discuss the issues of “*adivasi*” and “Hindu” law. The result of all of this was that when a writ petition was filed in the Supreme Court under the name of the SKMS to demand an end to discrimination against *adivasi* women under the “fundamental rights” clause, the specific demand was changed. Instead, it was proposed that, until a new, egalitarian “common civil code” was established that could be applied to all women in India, a new *adivasi* personal law should be formulated.

This way of presenting the demand was more or less acceptable to all. The difference with the Singhbhum case was that within the Dhule organizations tribals themselves were pressing the issue. The SCP, which in spite of its innovative ideology has a fairly traditional top-down structure of “party” and “mass fronts”, held a flourishing annual session of its SKMS in December 1984 to formalize approval for the demand. The Shramik Sanghatana-connected Stri Mukti Sanghatana group, which is somewhat more disorganized than the SCP and works more slowly, planned a large women’s conference at the end of 1985 to consider the fundamental rights issue, among others. Contact exists between the Shramik Sanghatana, local associated feminists, the Chhatra Yuva Sangarsh Vahini and eastern India tribal organizations including the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, although only at minimal level. Thus in many ways the stage is set for moving ahead on the topic of women and land.

### **Organization**

While the second half of the 1970s saw a major growth in new women’s organizations—not to mention an upsurge in membership and in the efficacy of the older ones—the first

half of the 1980s experienced a qualitative step forward in the significant though halting process of forming organizations of rural poor women.

At first glance, it is a bit surprising that the creation of rural women's organizations—broadly linked with a general class organization—should be a controversial issue. India is a country of proliferating mass organizations and the traditional parties (communist as well as socialist) all took for granted the necessity of having a women's organization (or of working on the women's front, just as on trade union, student or peasant fronts, etc.); nearly all of these organizations had significant rural membership. Yet in almost all cases (male) activists in newer class organizations developing in the countryside—some independent, some linked with new “non-party” left-leaning groups or with NGOs—resisted the founding of a separate women's organization with such arguments as: class organization already takes up women's issues (this was quite frequently true), so why the need for a specific women's organization? A women's organization would be non-class-oriented—you wouldn't want rich farmers to join? And so on.

Yet there was a difference from the situation the traditional parties faced in terms of structuring women's participation in such organizations. First, the newer groups of activists frequently perceived their mass organizations in very broad terms, not just as a trade union or sectional “front” within which party activists worked and offered leadership, but as an all-around movement of the working people. Within this framework many people genuinely felt a separate women's organization would be diversionary. More important probably was the fact that it was a period in which new dynamics of autonomy were taking place. For the traditional parties, there was little problem of coordination between the various “mass” organizations: the party leadership controlled both the women's and the peasant front, and assured that the policies of both were coordinated. With more democratic functioning of people's organizations, there is greater danger of contradictions arising between the needs and interests of women and those of other sectors, or the presumed interests of the overall movement. In any case, the fact remains that the “newer”, “non-traditional”, “non-party” activist groups have very often treated the women's issue as a “secondary contradiction”—just as the traditional left parties have done.

Rural organizations have also been slow in forming because of the difficulty rural women have in asserting themselves, in going a step beyond participation to protests and mobilizations, and in building structures in which they would play a major role in decision making. In spite of elements of a spontaneous assertion of what many would call a “socialist-feminist” perspective the need for outside stimulus and the dependence on middle-class activists has remained because nearly all of these agricultural labourers and poor peasant women feel their oppression in both class and sexual terms. Whether or not formal membership on a “mass” scale exists, very often village-level organizations depend on the initiative and hard work of one or two politically conscious activists. Large numbers of women may participate in various activities and express their needs and support, often in the face of considerable obstacles, but without the initiative of the “leading activists” they would not call a meeting; they are not ready to take hold of the organizational structure as their own. The way the “mass” party-linked women's organizations usually function is by means of one large resolution-passing, policy-formulating “session” once a year or so, with intermittent activity of the type described above. Women are mobilized for mass (even women's) protests not so much in terms of a feminist consciousness but because of loyalty to their union, leaders or something along these lines.

Nevertheless, despite these obstacles, the tentative women's organizations could be seen by 1980, sometimes at the initiative of rural poor women themselves.<sup>18</sup>

The most dramatic case was probably that of the Stri Mukti Sanghatana, organized by Bhil tribal women in Dhule district who were members of the Shramik Sanghatana—an organization of tribal (and some non-tribal) agricultural labourers and poor peasants that had been in existence since 1971 fighting over wage and land issues, also took up caste and women's (primarily anti-alcoholism) issues, and developed into something between a trade union and a broad social movement of the tribal labourers whose leading activists had links with a "post-traditionalist" Marxist group. A long period of active, militant women's participation in the movement as well as debates between activists and outsiders about the necessity of "separate women's organizations" was brought to a head in August 1980 by the tribal women themselves. Several of them, meeting at the Shramik Sanghatana office for adult literacy classes, responded to a case of the beating of a Muslim maidservant in Shahada town by voluntarily organizing a protest march and rally. At the rally they argued that "all women are oppressed and should unite and fight as women" and "even if a wife of a *maldar* (rich farmer) or Marwari comes to us we'll help her", and announced the formation of their own organization, the Stri Mukti Sanghatana.

This development was possible in Shahada for several reasons: its recent history of a militant mass movement with active women's participation, its relatively egalitarian and collective traditions of a tribal culture, its supportive attitude toward male activists, and a long period of contact with the growing women's movement in the rest of Maharashtra, including feminist groups in Bombay and Pune.

In fact, a comparison of the Shramik Sanghatana case with other tribal mass organizations (some with a "new left", others with traditional party leadership) suggests that the connection with some feminist activists has been a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for the formation of a women's organization. In Thane district, the Bhoomi Sena, which included women activists only recently, did not take up certain issues of women's oppression until after 1979–1980, for they had only organized women "as a part of the class". The nearby Kashtakari Sanghatana addressed a number of cases of women's oppression from the very start, partly because, for a number of years, it had had a very young educated woman activist—the only one working in rural Maharashtra at the time. However, neither organization has formed a women's group. Similarly, a unit of the CPM's Kisan Sabha working among the same group of tribals in this very district apparently has not had a unit of the CPM-linked women's organization, even in a formal sense, until recently (in contrast to what was then the Dhule unit of the CPM and what is now the Satyashodhak Communist Party), in spite of the fact that it is the oldest area of rural communist work in the state dating back to the famous "Warli revolt" of the 1940s. From this we can also argue that even where a party has a policy of forming women's fronts, their actual implementation depends very much on local initiative.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> There are a large number of articles giving the background to women's organizing in connection with Shramik Sanghatana; see especially Basu 1981; Mies 1975, 1976; Paranjape 1981; Savara and Gothoskar 1981; and Gothoskar and Kanhere 1984. On the Singhbhum situation, see Dr. Anne and Dilip 1984. See also Burnad 1983 and the discussion in papers edited by the Young India Project 1982. On Sangli district, see Omvedt and Rao 1985. In addition to these and to discussions with a wide number of party and non-party women activists, as well as with men working in rural areas, sporadic involvement with one small village organization in Kadegaon for the last eight years has brought to light the various obstacles and intricacies of building rural organizations.

<sup>19</sup> A further observation on this case is that here too "feminism" is a matter of perspective, not simply sex. The long-time CPM leader of the Thane Warlis is a woman; while the CPM/SCP leader in Sakri-Navapur *talukas* of Dhule district is a man; however the recent increase of SCP-linked women's activity and the taking on of the *adivasi* women's land rights issue have been linked to the entry into the SCP of both young women and men associated with a previous socialist youth group.

In any case, the August 1980 rally of the Shramik Stri Mukti Sanghatana was followed by a period in which village women brought their complaints to a small team of tribal women activists, who would attend to these problems in various ways, sometimes by calling a mass meeting of the village women for a kind of spontaneous “people’s” court against the offender. Most of the issues taken up at this time involved not so much sexual harassment by rich non-tribal farmers (these had been dealt with severely in the earlier period and had relatively diminished) but rather wife-beating and harassment within the tribal community itself. Following this period, a dramatic event in 1981 was the very popular women’s rally organized as a May Day meeting—to stress that workers are women too—which was attended by nearly 2,000 tribal women and many non-tribal women’s leaders from varying political groups. The meeting was marked by group discussions and street theatre performed both by a Pune group and a local tribal group. The development of the tribal women’s Stri Mukti Sanghatana group since that time has been more sporadic; the tribal women have, from time to time, been dependent on outside women activists (for whom making the long trip from Bombay/Pune to Dhule remains arduous) for support and have been caught up in the various political tensions of the Shramik Sanghatana, but the organization remains a unique one of its type.

Other similar organizational initiatives appeared during the same period. In Chattisgarh, a heavily tribal region of Madhya Pradesh, contract-hired tribal mineworkers in iron ore mines that supply steel to the huge Bhilai plant had organized a militant new union in 1977, the Chhattisgarh Mines Shramik Sangh (CMSS), which quickly developed innovative practices in uniting with tribal peasants on themes of local identity and other social issues. In 1980, tribal women connected with this organization also formed their own organization, the Mahila Mukti Morcha. In Singhbhum district of Bihar, following a tribal contract labourers’ strike at Meghahataburu in 1982, another organization known as Women’s Power (Era Pey) was formed. Neither organization, however, lasted very long, the first because of a generally negative attitude on the part of CMSS leadership (another case of a movement that is very innovative and non-traditional in other respects but that takes a traditional position on women’s issues), and the second because, after the construction project ended, the contract labourers returned to their villages and lost touch with the activists. However, it may be noted that many of the new urban women’s organizations have had the same kind of unstable history.

Other women’s organizations began to be formed by activists working with rural-based NGOs in south India. A Dalit women’s organization in several villages near Bhongir in Andhra Pradesh was formed in 1978 by women working with CROSS, a large, liberal NGO. In Tamil Nadu, the Society for Rural Education and Development, a Dalit-based organization, began to move toward a class perspective and after 1977 formed a rural labourers’ organization in several districts. By 1980–1981 work with women had started and women labourers were mobilized to protest atrocities, fighting for the right to draw water from village wells, and confronting landlords on both social and economic issues. Although at the beginning men in the community had opposed their women attending meetings and organizing, and even though there was a good deal of debate among the activists themselves about the need for a women’s organization, one such organization—the Rural Women’s Labour Movement—was eventually formed in Arakkonam district in 1983.

In March 1985, women connected with a rural organization in a drought-ridden taluka of Sangli district that had come into existence after the Bombay textile-strike of 1982–1983 (textile workers returning to their villages had first organized protests on



strike issues and then joined in support of the struggles of rural labourers and toiling peasants) and organized their Stri Mukti Sangarsh Calval (Women's Liberation Struggle Movement). Many other rural organizations—including, most notably, the Chhatra Yuva Sangarsh Vahini—are increasingly debating the role of a women's organization. The gradual increase of educated women joining rural-based organizations as activists; the increase of women-related issues and the practice of holding separate women's sessions and of developing informal women's village units even if a separate women's organization is not formally established; and the development of women fulltimers from agricultural labourer backgrounds in organizations led by traditional left parties—are all observable trends in many areas.<sup>20</sup>

The 1980s have thus been a period of gaining new depth within the women's movement in India—although progress has been slow, vis-à-vis both the issues raised and organizational influence. In terms of issues, it might be noted that the demands for employment (“equal participation in social production”), which dominated so much of the thinking of both activists and theoreticians in the early period, may have been justified in Marxist terms, but were in fact often linked to and fed by a liberal developmentalist perspective that sought to ensure women would not be “left out of” the development process. Almost no agitations or campaigns of the women's movement focused on employment issues; agricultural labourers or women workers might organize for higher wages, but this usually took place through union-type organizations that were only peripherally connected to the women's movement—at most through what might be called “consciousness-raising” campaigns that included meetings, speeches and songs. Women's agitations, as such, focused for a long time on fighting what were called “atrocities” (dowry deaths, rapes, etc.), while actual activity in the area of employment was taken up by governmental agencies and NGOs. The effect of most of the “income-generating” schemes was to link poor women to the market on slightly better terms than before.

In fact the women's movement in the 1980s has moved more in the direction of taking up issues that linked kinship structure to means of production—issues that were more “fundamental” even in a narrow Marxist sense. This meant that both the fight for land on the part of rural women and the challenge to “personal law”, which discriminates against minorities, were taken up at the legal level. (In the latter case, it might be noted that these challenges—for example of Shahnaz Sheikh to Muslim personal laws—were presented partially on a spontaneous, individual basis by middle-class minority women, influenced by the developing atmosphere of women's rights and helped by women's organizations, after having decided, on their own initiative, to fight.) The battle for employment, higher wages and even for unionization remains as crucial to rural women and their organizations as any other “bread and butter” issues. The former are basically trade union fights, similar to the struggle for reforms in the sphere of consumption (for example, against rice, for toilet facilities, for slum improvement facilities, etc.) and perhaps a crucial part of any grassroots level organizing, but do not involve fundamental transformations the way land issues and challenges to kinship structures do.

At the same time, it should be remembered that participation itself remains an *issue* for poor urban and rural women. For women, participation in class struggle is itself a step

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<sup>20</sup> Yet the fact remains that there are almost no women from working-class, rural poor backgrounds able to participate in discussions, organizational processes, etc. with educated middle-class women on an equal footing, which shows just how extreme the problem of class difference in India really is.

outside the confines of their homes (even if they are women who work in the fields everyday); participation in class organizations on an egalitarian basis, or simply attending general “peasant” or “agricultural labourer” meetings in the village square is something that may have to be fought for;<sup>21</sup> attending a *woman’s* meeting or conference often provokes considerable hostility from family members—hostility that sometimes requires the individual resistance of women, but that nearly always requires some support from sympathetic organizational activists (who are primarily men).

This means that the consolidation of rural women’s organizations in the 1980s differs from the formation of women’s groups among middle-class Western women (or even middle-class Asian women). It is true that the formation of the first “women’s groups” among US and European women often met with male scorn and mockery; nevertheless, these women were already independent and living in a society and culture with a considerable associational tradition. This is not so for poor Indian women who have generally had hardly any associational ties outside the family (except, for a few, through religious networks) and who rarely leave their homes except in the company of kin. In this context, organization itself represents a challenge to patriarchal structures and values. For poor women in general and poor rural women in particular, participation signifies the beginning (perhaps in a small way) of a radical break in which building new kinds of class organizations and building women’s organizations are novel processes that enjoy cultural and political significance—the two must go together. For both men and women, creating a new social consciousness, breaking the bonds of past ideological domination and laying the foundation for creating new organizational forms of popular power challenge not only class power but also the patriarchal kinship structures that underlie so many of the broader class-caste structures of domination.

## Thailand

Though a close Asian neighbour, Thailand seems almost to be at the other end of the sociopolitical spectrum from India. It is a highly authoritarian regime that successfully suppresses most forms of mass organizing, not to mention protest, yet it has a very egalitarian village-kinship system at its base. Given the stark contrast of Thailand’s gender system with that of most other Asian or world societies, it is frustrating to find a social science literature that never discusses its significance for the overall social structure. One anthropologist has argued that the kinship system has played a major role in the fragility of traditional South-East Asian states—not an illogical position even in Marxist terms, which would analyse states primarily as superstructures determined or at least conditioned by a village base (Winzler 1976, 1974), but none of the current “political economy” or “class struggle” studies even glance at the issue. Here as elsewhere, Marxism has interpreted “production relations” only in terms of the production of goods and commodities and ignored the role of “production of life” as structured by family and kinship systems, which theoretically should also be an important factor in defining a mode of production. Given this, the impressions of a non-specialist are in danger of being invalidated but connections do nevertheless have to be discussed.

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<sup>21</sup> Here again a difference between the Dalit section and the caste Hindu section (the village centre) is often apparent: Dalit women freely gather with men around their local meeting places, while going to the “*gram panchayat*”, or village central hall, is much harder for both caste Hindu and Dalit women.

### **Traditional structures: Participatory and anti-participatory**

South-East Asia in general, and Thailand in particular, has one of the most egalitarian kinship systems in the world—usually described by anthropologists as “bilateral”. Among the peasantry, land can be inherited by both boys and girls, but generally only by those who live with the parents after marriage. Since most marriages are matrilineal, this means that in effect the system is matrilineal, which is how many Thais themselves describe it (anthropologists generally refuse to call it matrilineal since there are no deep and functioning lineages). It is usually the youngest girl who inherits the family house and compound and is responsible for the parents. Marriage is mainly a matter of choice on the part of the couple and at a relatively late age, and divorce does not carry any real social stigma. Within the household women appear to have nearly an equal share in authority (and often a major responsibility for financial matters) and although the sexual division of labour, which gives them primary responsibility for cooking and childcare, exists here as in other societies, it is not quite as rigid as elsewhere (with men sharing many of the burdens); the traditional peasant lifestyle makes these burdens somewhat less arduous than in other countries.<sup>22</sup> It is hard to imagine any kinship system more different than the South Asian one, yet it appears to be at least as old, if not older, than any other. Thailand is unique in having a record of some of the world’s earliest agriculture—as archeological discoveries at Ban Chiang and Non Nok Tha show—and managed to avoid developing into a state-class society until relatively late.<sup>23</sup> States did not appear in neighbouring South-East Asian areas until after the first centuries AD and were never consolidated in Thailand until the Tha states at Sukhotai and Ayuthaya appeared in the thirteenth century. Even then they were characterized by relatively weak political structures barely exploiting egalitarian base village communities because there was a lack of a consolidated landlord-feudal intermediary—these systems are described by contemporary theorists, more or less, as “early class societies” or types of the “Asiatic mode of production”.<sup>24</sup> The correlate to this “early class” form has been the long maintenance of egalitarian kin-village structures, though which came first is hard to say. It is also tempting to argue that much of South Asia—particularly eastern India, which was inhabited by proto-Munda groups related to the Mons and Khmers—originally had similar kinship structures until the development of the class-caste mode of production was imposed.

This is not to say that Thai women are not exploited. Here, as elsewhere, the development of class-state society instituted a form of patriarchy. Not only did the pre-capitalist Thai *sakdina* state appropriate the surplus of village communities, but it also made men the “representatives” of these communities and subjected them to four months corvée labour and/or state military service while women continued to work on the land. Ideological justification for this patriarchal form and for the development of more patrilineal and polygamous structures among the aristocracy was provided by importing the South Asian religions of Hinduism and Buddhism. (Although it seems erroneous to simply call these “Indianized states”: the deification of rulers and the cosmological shows

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<sup>22</sup> On Thai traditional society and women generally, see Keyes 1977, 1984; Khin Thitsa 1980; Coedes 1969; Tantiwaranamal and Pande 1983; Chitranukroh-Vattanghi 1977; Phongpaichit 1980; and Office of the Prime Minister 1979.

<sup>23</sup> See Solheim 1975; Bayard 1980; Charoenwongsay and Sabhadracks Diskul 1978. For detailed studies of related societies, see Nash 1965 and Stoler 1977.

<sup>24</sup> Thailand’s pre-capitalist mode of production is discussed briefly in Elliott 1978 and Flood 1975; for theoretical perspectives see Godelier 1978; Danilova 1971 and Semenov 1977.

associated with palace-temple complexes are not simply South Asian.) Fortunately for Thai women, Hinduism was never more than superficially relevant. Buddhism penetrated much deeper and had an ambiguous impact; it coexisted with the indigenous animistic cults in which women played the main role in serving household spirits, and it remained relatively egalitarian in “class” terms—yet it accorded spiritual capacity (*pon*) overwhelmingly to men and allowed only men to become *bhikkus*; women could become the inferior non-ordained *mai chi* or acquire merit through their sons’ entering the monkhood. This helped to legitimize what some have described as a gender division of labour in which women played the major economic roles while men monopolized religious and political structures. (Women might very well respond with: “Well then, let the men have the spiritual world!” but the nature of pre-capitalist state systems meant that this allowed for the exploitation of their labour through political control.)<sup>25</sup>

Thus, in contrast to South Asia where patriarchy and caste inequalities pervaded both village and family systems, in Thailand the major lines of cleavage run between village and state. The village was quite egalitarian both in terms of class and kinship; the state was pervaded by patrilineal practices backed up by aristocratic manoeuvrings for power and later by the influx of Sino-Thai Confucian-oriented systems; patriarchy as well as economic exploitation defined the relationships between the two. This system seems to have continued, with no significant change, into the modern period and Thailand’s integration into the world capitalist system.

Thailand’s escape from direct colonial rule has meant that its pre-capitalist elite was able to “modernize” itself in a more effectively authoritarian and anti-democratic form. “King, religion and nation” were ideologized to be sacred values (and in spite of the existence of considerable minorities, identified overwhelmingly as ethnic Thai) as the Buddhist *sangha* was subordinated to political control and outlying regions integrated into a tightly controlled state. “Feudal” laws, which allowed the buying and selling of women, were replaced by “reformed” family codes in the 1920s and the Monogamy Law of 1935, which outlawed polygamy, ended the right of men to physically punish wives or kill adulterous lovers. These laws, however, merely institutionalized a bourgeois form of patriarchy, made it more difficult for women to get a divorce and required that the husband’s consent be given for any contract entered into on the part of the wife. (Outlawing polygamy legally while it continued socially meant only that second wives no longer had any protection; ironically, women who often controlled significant property could no longer act independently of their husbands: in this way, “modernization”—carried through largely by Sino-Thai legal experts acting on Western advice—meant worsening the position of Thai women.<sup>26</sup>) Similarly, the state-enforced “political representation” by men continued into the new era, with men becoming heads of villages and localities and, while members of whatever state-sponsored cooperatives or farmers’ associations existed, women were involved only in “housewives’ associations”.

Modernization, or uneven capitalist development, has been much slower in penetrating Thai society and agrarian economy than those of South Asia; it has had the same effect not only of intensifying existing class inequalities but also of gradually marginalizing women relative to men and subordinating their labour to international accumulation. Men and women who were pushed from the land migrated to the cities for

<sup>25</sup> The debate on the role of Buddhism can be seen in Thitsa 1980; Keyes 1984; and Tantiwiranond and Pandey 1983.

<sup>26</sup> Legal changes are discussed in Thitsa 1980 and Szanton 1985.

work, but in the new industries in Bangkok and on the rapidly growing eastern seaboard in recent years women have been systematically discriminated against in terms of wages, because the view that their income represents some kind of family “extra” is prevalent. In the developing agricultural wage labour the difference between male and female wage scales is also felt, though to a lesser degree. Wage labour has remained much less significant in Thailand. Women in working class and lower white collar families normally worked long arduous hours at extra income-earning activities (for example, food vending) to keep families from sinking on the economic scale. But in contrast to India, they kept control of their earnings and educated daughters as much if not more than sons (Szanton 1985). Here, too, a paucity of studies on gender-kinship relations within the changing class structure of Thai society makes it difficult to trace the process.

Prostitution is the industry that most dramatically connects women’s labour to the world capitalist system; estimates range from 400,000 to 700,000 prostitutes in all of Thailand. Its source lies in the “demands” arising from the aristocratic Thai’s legitimization of male sexual prowess, and the city of Bangkok serving as a gigantic brothel for American soldiers on rest and recreation; in highly commercialized sex-tourism; and in the growing inequalities that are pushing poor women out of the villages in the northern and northeastern regions. While the role of Buddhist values in “legitimizing” this occupation is somewhat debated,<sup>27</sup> what is striking about prostitution in Thailand is that it is treated like a normal profession. Apparently village girls can migrate, take up the job, which pays better than most other alternatives, and return afterward to their homes and marry without any social stigma being attached to them.<sup>28</sup> In South Asia, where rape can brand a woman as impure for the rest of her life, this is somewhat remarkable. Prostitution, which remains an exploited profession, tends to destroy the women’s health—but this is true of nearly all capitalist industries in the area, and textiles and electronics are much worse paid.

### **From the “democratic period” to the 1980s**

As in the case of India, Thailand’s “participation explosion” in 1973–1976 had its roots in the gradually developing contradictions of the 1960s. Increasing commercialization of agriculture and “green revolution” policies, while not giving rise to the clear *kulak* class that was starting to dominate Indian villages, was still intensifying rural inequalities and drawing the top, official strata of the village into a merchant-landlord-official network of power. By the 1980s this would lead the village’s exploited majority to feel they were being “excluded from society”, something that probably began in the 1960s. The development of a new urban manufacturing sector, however, led to increased worker discontent and rising urban struggles ranging from illegal strikes to protests against bus fare increases, while US efforts to build up Thailand as a garrison state against the upsurge of new revolts in Asia only led to the spread of communist insurgency, from an estimated six affected provinces in 1960 to forty (two-thirds of the total) in 1975.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> What if it does? it might be asked. One argument is that the greater permissiveness of Buddhist-influenced traditional morality (sex before marriage not seen as a sin) makes the profession possible; this is like arguing that freer tribal values in India expose tribal women to sexual exploitation, the implication being that a chastity-ridden tradition of secluding women within a male-controlled family would do the opposite and is therefore preferable.

<sup>28</sup> In addition to the thorough Phongpaichit 1985 study, see Hantrakul 1983 for an approach to the working woman’s point of view, and Sereewat 1985.

<sup>29</sup> General studies include Elliott 1978; Bell 1978; Mallet 1978; Turton 1978; de Beer 1978; Anderson 1977; Morell and Samudavanija 1981; Chiengkul 1983; Bruneau 1984; Southeast Asia Resource Action Center 1980; and Turton 1984.

Growing economic crisis, inflation and the increasingly evident blows against US imperialism in South-East Asia led to snowballing mass demonstrations in 1973 that brought down the government and inaugurated a new “democratic period”. As one foreign observer recalled, “There were marches, demonstrations, protests, something happening all the time. The lid was off and people seemed so happy”. Students, workers’ unions and peasants’ organizations (particularly with the Farmers’ Federation in the north and central regions) mobilized quite rapidly and militantly, with increasing coordination and communication between these different sectors.

Women’s participation was (apparently) active on all these fronts, but little remarked upon, for no specific women’s issues were raised. Women’s student groups were formed in every university, but were mainly part of the general movement, and a student song of the time, formulated rather like a conventional Maoist idiom, called upon women to rise:

They say  
 you are flowers  
 you are slaves  
 slaves in the kitchen  
 slaves for the feudalistic state  
 We say  
 arise Thai women  
 we are the great  
 unite Thai women  
 defeat the feudals’ bed  
 fight to change the feudalistic state

That there was some change in attitude in connection with women, however, is perhaps expressed by the fact that 1976 saw the passing of a new family code, which granted women equal rights to divorce and removed some of the disabilities imposed on them by contracts.

Women were also militant participants in peasants’ and workers’ agitations (they were among those killed in police shootings), but leadership remained in the hands of men. Just as in the “feudal” period males had been “representatives” for the state, in the contemporary period they were the village heads and members for the family of government-sponsored farmers’ associations, and thus the new Farmers’ Federation and unions invariably had male leadership. Was this merely because (especially in the case of peasants) women’s greater home responsibilities made it more difficult for them to attend far-away demonstrations or organizational meetings, as many argue? Or were the perceptions of organizers and student supporters (normally from the Thai elite or even the Sino-Thai elite) also a factor in not challenging traditional practices? It does seem clear that for middle-class intellectuals (including social scientists), peasant men continued to be “peasants” and peasant women were simply “women” or “wives”.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> See, for example, the poems cited at the beginning of chapters 7 and 8 of Morell and Chai-anan (1981). This is of course practically a universal trait (for example, working class men are “workers”, working class women are “workers’ wives”, and so on), but it is particularly frustrating among the peasantry where women are primarily “social producers”, and it is disconcerting to hear “class struggle comes first” from those who invariably exclude women from the class.

Nevertheless the dynamics of participation might well have led to the growth of a militant women's movement linked to the overall social movement, as has occurred in India, were it not for the fact that these participatory possibilities were radically curtailed by the brutal coup of October 1976. Thousands of youth and intellectuals fled to the jungle to join and invigorate the CPT-led insurgency, but here, too, there seems to have been little particular focus on women's issues and apparently not even a separate women's organization. Among women ex-students, however, there was some questioning of the nature of organizing in the earlier period, and an ex-student leader, Jiranan Phitpricha, wrote a book describing women in developing countries as the "fourth world" and prophesying a gender-equal utopia described as the land of Phra Sri Ariya, the last Buddha (Thitsa 1985:23). In Thailand as in India the 1976-1980 period appears to have been one of germinating tendencies toward women's movements.

With the collapse of the communist insurgency, a renewed stability of the state and an increasing process of capitalist penetration and enclave industrialization disrupting the traditional village society, the 1980s was a new era both for ideological and organizational trends on the left. At the ideological level, for many of the earlier generation radicals, the period was one of disillusionment—the "end of liberation war and back to the democratic state", with a consciousness of the inadequacy of earlier analyses but with no convincing alternative. Others tried to see positive signs in the decline of mass confidence in the positive benefits of technological change and in the renewed attention to "democracy" interpreted as the necessity of egalitarian relations pervading all spheres of life (including relations between villagers and outsiders), and in the effort to link radicalism to indigenous traditions (including emphasis on folk Buddhism as opposed to "Indian Buddhism"). This meant a rise in the sensitivity to the difference in viewpoints of middle-class women and village women; it also meant an emphasis on small-group work as contrasted to party and "mass" organizing. The 1980s also saw a growing legitimacy of action on topics such as health and medicine, ecology and problems of women.

Heavy and effective state repression (with a strong grip on the generation that had emerged in leading roles in 1973-1976) of course meant that most organization had to be non-obtrusive. Nevertheless, participatory urges continued to appear, often in new forms, in groups (cooperatives of various kinds) emerging among peasants and workers. (The peasant groups, however, continued to involve mainly men.) Among middle-class sectors, the increased availability of foreign funding helped the growth of NGOs, which appeared to many to provide a kind of shelter for new participatory activity, some of which involved significant village work.<sup>31</sup> But NGO activity remained ambiguous: it is difficult to assess how the egalitarian, participatory ideology motivating many activists would ultimately agree with the bureaucracy of most funded organizations, while the heavy predominance of young women in NGO activity was explained by many simply in terms of the job market. NGOs offered social service-oriented employment, but on a temporary basis, with wages that were less likely to attract male graduates, and there remained the same kind of "informal sector" work that women have been increasingly filling the world over.

In any event there was significant new activity on women's issues and organizing of women in the 1980s. On the official level, the National Council of Women of Thailand became more active and the government initiated programmes to promote women as

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<sup>31</sup> A useful article on NGOs is Ungphakorn 1984; see also Arya 1985. (For a selection from the vast Indian debate on NGOs, see the collection *Action Groups: Their Future*, ISI Documentation Centre, Bangalore, 1982.)

village heads (there were said to be some 30–40 by 1985, though some disputed this figure) and to create more “income-generating activity” for peasant “housewives”. The bigger NGOs sponsored a good deal of such activity in Thailand as they had in India, and this led to a liberal reform that served to link women more securely to the capitalist world market. Meetings of rural women were also sponsored as part of agricultural development efforts. The availability of new research funds and a growing concern about women generally helped to make available new data on the problems of prostitutes, women and child workers in other industries. Furthermore, women from a regional university who had initiated a village “participatory” research report were told by village women, “you’re the first to ask us what we want to do”. Public meetings and, occasionally, protests (over sex tours and over the use of Depo-Provera and other injectible contraceptives) were held; and participants at university meetings on the issue of prostitution were, reportedly, struck by the outspokenness and articulateness of the “massage parlour” representatives invited to speak. Special organizations dealing with the problem of prostitution ranged from a “Thailand Night Girls’ Right Guard”, formed as a type of phone-in centre for “service girls” and supported by a Thammasat University women’s group on 8 March 1984, to the Women’s Information Centre, which received support from the Dutch Embassy to furnish information to women travelling abroad in search of work in prostitution. Another level of grassroots stirring was seen in women’s protests against the tradition of excluding women from the Buddhist *bhikkhu* order; one case was recently reported from the north-east of a peasant woman jailed for putting on the robes of a monk, while an older woman who had succeeded in getting herself ordained after trips to India and Taiwan had set up a temple outside of Bangkok, though she continued to be treated as Mahayana by the Thai Theravada Buddhists.<sup>32</sup>

Friends of Women, founded in 1980, is the most active of the new women’s groups. With a largely upper middle class and professional membership, it takes a cautiously feminist stance and links itself to a broader movement for social change. It has sponsored programmes and activities, such as public meetings, essay competitions, slide shows and the publication of a magazine that comes out two to three times a year on a wide number of topics. It has experimented with a women’s cafe and contributes to providing legal aid for working class women and in some cases of forced prostitution. On the negative side, the group’s general statement reflects the lack of any actual contact with working class or peasant women, and the general depiction of women’s oppression is made in abstract terms that fit the situation of elite women more than the cultural realities of the countryside (Thai Development Newsletter 1984).

Up to now, there has been little of the kind of dynamism in a developing Thai “women’s movement” that we see in India. It may be argued that this is due to the fact that the urgency of women’s issues is not nearly so great in Thailand; certainly the general egalitarianism of village society means a lack of the kind of “atrocities” that have served as a flashpoint for organizing in India. Nevertheless, the exclusion of women from positions of political power (and with this high-level economic power)—increasing with the rise of capitalist influences—parallels and is intertwined with the general exclusion of the working class and peasantry from participatory power. It might be argued that the

<sup>32</sup> Sources for this information came from interviews, representatives of Friends of Women, Foundation for Children, Drug Study Group, Chulalongkorn University Social Research Centre, Thai Development Support Committee, Asian Cultural Forum on Development, Women’s Information Centre, Khon Kaen University (Social Science Department), Redd Barna (Save the Children).



growing efforts of the rural and urban poor to create counter-organizations and counter-cultures in order to resist ideological hegemony, official violence and economic exploitation might find important resources in the general social equality that has existed within traditional village and kin structures, and which permitted the expression of strength and force on the part of women. Certainly the “spirit of struggle and the relatively defiant attitude” of Thai working women, including prostitutes, has impressed many (Hantrakul 1983). In this context, it is probable that the general repressiveness of the Thai state, which retards the development of mass movements, is consequently slowing down activity.

## **Conclusions: Fourth World Feminism**

The growth of participatory movements throughout the Third World has included the uneven rise of new women’s movements and the emergence of a new “Third World feminism”. Yet the close of the Decade of Women coincides with what seems to be a right-wing consolidation in numerous countries, and which spells an uncertain future for progressive and participatory movements.

The women’s movement in countries like the United States appears at times to have reached a kind of crisis. This is not simply a matter of the final failure of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and the bombings of abortion centres. There is also internal uncertainty. Radical feminism has apparently metamorphosed into a “cultural feminism” that abandons ideals of androgyny and simple abolition of patriarchy for a celebration of femaleness. Liberal feminism has given birth to a “conservative feminism”, which turns to an appreciation of family values and the maintenance of a public/private distinction. Both of these have in their own way forsaken the “sexual struggle”—the one by separating from the male world, the other by making major compromises with it. Socialist feminists appear to be in a state of despair, with no lasting organizational influence and a feeling they have had no effect on the movement, while “Marxism-feminism” has emerged as a trend that is theoretically quite vigorous but thoroughly ostracized within the academy.

Now there are signs that the women’s liberation movement is indeed spreading from white, middle-class women in advanced capitalist societies to Asian, African and Latin American countries (and in some cases among the working people of these countries). But can slogans for “Third World feminism”, “international feminism” or “Asian feminism” save the day?

This is not an easy question, for while there are many positive developments there are also signs that certain kinds of semi-elitist trends, liberally aided by the various international and national funding processes, are taking hold. Part of the problem is that the term feminism, or the theory and practice of the women’s movement, is by no means clear.

Certainly there is an important feminist core that remains as valid for Third World societies as it does anywhere. This includes the challenge to hierarchy and domination in all forms of social relations, the refusal to accept the separation of “public” and “private”, along with any kind of gender-based “division of labour”, the redefinition of revolution itself to mean not simply collective control of the means of production but a transformation of all social relationships. These have revolutionary implications on all levels. At the same time, the analytical stress on the importance of relating “productive” and “reproductive” processes and structures, which might be called the core of the Marxist-feminist contribution, is very relevant.

Still, this topic remains at an abstract level, and until these practical and theoretical insights include a concrete understanding of specific Third World societies, the women's movements in these societies may remain just as vulnerable and as liable to isolation as those in many advanced capitalist countries.

There is for instance the question of the family/kinship structures. Western feminism has taken a radical stance vis-à-vis the bourgeois nuclear family, while by and large feminist trends in the Third World have not been very willing to do so. Yet it might be argued that the women's movement in India has had to challenge aspects of the existing family structure *in practice* much more than the women's movement in the West. The latter has grown on a base of women already independent of traditional family structures, and has ridden a wave of social change that produced an increasing number of female-headed families with employment opportunities making life extremely difficult but nevertheless *possible* for single women in spite of the "feminization of poverty". In other words, feminists in the West were already outside of the family they defied at the time the women's movement developed (and part of the current crisis of the movement may be the task of relating to those who are not in this position).

This has not been true for India. Though there is a growing percentage of deserted women and female-headed families, and though quite often the women activists at the grassroots level are those who are widowed or otherwise "independent" of family ties, still the vast majority of women are caught, one way or another within kinship structures, in a situation with much fewer employment alternatives. These are structures that are even more "patriarchal" than those of the West, though they have been affected in various ways by the history of social movements in the country and differ among different castes and regions. The processes of dependent capitalism appear to maintain more than break down the existing patriarchal structures, while intensifying contradictions within them. This means that the women's movement has had to confront some aspects of the family in a much more direct way—from fighting for property rights or against dowry deaths to establishing local efforts to help harassed daughters-in-law or beaten wives receive a little more leverage against their affiliates and kin. It also means that women cannot carry on this fight as a feminist enclave, for such enclaves do not really exist. The other side of this is that the whole challenge to caste-linked structures of patrilineal inheritance, patrilocal residence, arranged marriages (within the caste) and male elder control is one that is shared by many men—including specific social groups such as the low castes, tribes and others.

The situation is different still in Thailand. Here traditional kinship structures are in many ways more egalitarian (though less individualistic) than those of Western societies, while their subordination to the state is one that involves patriarchal relationships as well as economic exploitation. Such egalitarian/matrilineal structures might be expected to be an important resource in the fight for breaking down repressive structures—even though it appears that in both India and Thailand only a few steps have been taken by the women's movement and the general people's movements in developing the indigenous cultural base for a revolutionary participatory movement.

In other words, the concrete structures of production/reproduction may vary tremendously from one society to another, due both to different pre-colonial traditions and to the different ways in which the societies have been linked historically to the world system. It is difficult to imagine any progress in the movements without there being a thorough understanding of these variations and specificities.

The last decade has introduced a host of new participatory movements—of women, low castes, indigenous peoples—that raise new issues and challenge traditional and

“modern” forms of oppression. It seems to end, however, with a feeling of being stymied by increasing contradictions, by the economic gap between men and women, by the growing marginalization of women through specific forms of exploitation from prostitution on a world scale to dowry deaths, by the progressive assault on the environment and on the lands of peasants and tribals, and by states moving toward more anti-participatory structures and relying more and more on “updated” appeals to traditional chauvinisms. For the moment, what seems to be on the agenda for most of these countries is the transformation, not of their economic and state structures, but of the left and oppositional movements that have sought in the past to transform them. This is one of the major challenges of the women’s movement, for as long as participation involves only half the population, it can hardly be expected to build up either the power or the new ideological consciousness to counter suppression.

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## Chapter 11

### **Citizenship and Identity: Final Reflections<sup>1</sup>**

*Elizabeth Jelin*<sup>2</sup>

(1990)

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An important distinction has been introduced into the mode of thinking about women's participation in social movements and their role as protagonists (or not): the difference between women's participation, women's movements and movements for (or by) women. This distinction points to the fact that—either as a response to their class situation or ethnic identity or because they belong to social groups or categories—women participate and have participated in struggles and social movements since the dawning of history.

From time to time, the history of popular movements registers the presence of exceptional women, of heroines, whose participation has determined the path these struggles have taken, but the great majority of women, especially those participating at the grassroots level, remain invisible and silent. To this type of participation—subordinate and minority, given the sexual division of labour and differences of power—must be added those organizations developed by women themselves for various ends and significance. In popular sectors in Latin America, the better known of these organizations are those promoted by the Church and charities—all of which are therefore promoted and directed from the outside.

One important historical innovation in Latin America, which has spread to significant sectors of the population during the 1980s, is the search for autonomy within class/gender organizations. There has been a development of women's movements from popular sectors seeking to take control of their own destiny, whether within the women's organizations promoted by the Church or political parties, or in those in which women are subordinate and in a minority (such as the unions). These movements are novel in the form of their organization, development and participation as well as their ideological and symbolic content.

The cases we have studied aim to show how the various types and planes of actions converge in social reality, thus obviating the analytical need to differentiate between

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women's participation, women's organizations and feminist movements. We sought those spaces in which women are more universal subjects, rather than those that emphasize the segmentation of positions and roles. In other words, the challenge was largely to find the rationale and significance of women's action rather than to classify their actions according to types of organization or stated objectives.

In this sense, rather than studying feminism as a movement distinct from other forms of women's collective action, we are interested in recovering its role in two senses. The first is that of "critical consciousness": a nucleus that elaborates the content and significance of demands and needs, an essential element of popular movements, until such time as the women of the popular sectors are themselves able to recognize and appropriate these claims, either through their own elaboration or by learning alongside militant women. The second sense is that of an axis serving to generalize demands for action, which if left to the multiplicity of specific and concrete situations might not come to be reflected as a new social protagonist present in the sphere of global society.<sup>3</sup>

### **Women's Social Position: Public and Private Distinctions**

It is now commonplace to refer to distinctions between private, public and socially defined gender roles (man in the public arena, woman in the private sphere) that limit the forms of women's public actions. The division of labour is not symmetrical and equal. In effect, participation in the public sphere of social production in contemporary societies implies access to an income, of great importance in terms of personal autonomy and the control of resources and alternatives for action and, above all, access to the sphere of power and social control. Power and control are established in the public sphere and although these are not totally independent of the domestic sphere, the latter is becoming increasingly subordinated to events in public life. Furthermore, it is in the public sphere that solidarity links are established with others sharing similar social positions, that awareness of common interests is acquired and that networks of communication and information are set up (Elshtain 1981).

The distinction between what is private and what is public has come about as a result of a combination of historical and social factors (Donzelot 1979). Even in areas as apparently "private" as sexuality there is an undeniable social pressure to conform.

the majority of we women do not have free control of our bodies. As with slaves, others make the decisions for us about our needs and our fantasies. These decisions are generally expressed in terms of 'control' of our reproductive potential. This 'control' is apparent in the areas of health, family, medicine, social security. Political decisions that focused more on the process of social reproduction or reproduction of the labour force and of increasing or decreasing the demographic potential of countries and the region, than on the people who are the protagonists of these processes and their needs, suffering, happiness, frustrations. (Feijóo 1984:23)

Recognition of this historical background to privacy and subjectivity has still not been assimilated by the very subjects, women, nor has it been clearly incorporated into their collective actions—at least not in Latin America. Nevertheless, the dialectic of

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<sup>3</sup> Literature on feminism in Latin America is relatively rich in historical analyses (Kirkwood 1984; Feijóo 1983; Hahner 1981; Rodríguez Villamil and Sapriza 1983; Villavicencio 1983; Lavrin 1985). As regards the present situation, the most complete source of reference is to be found in publications of the Women's Alternative Communication Unit of the Latin American Institute for Transnational Studies (ILET) especially their "Mujer/ILET" Bulletin.



women's collective action, in terms of their "traditional" role, provides the potential to discover and incorporate such recognition into such current and visible issues as sexuality or women's reactions to the crisis in state services and the recognition of how it affects and determines the quantity and the onus of domestic work over and above the traditional aspects of "duty" and "labour of love".

There is no clear-cut distinction between the sexes with regard to degree of power. Excluded from power in the public domain, women still have the domestic domain. This domestic role of women implies specific forms of social relations

Oppression has not only meant a lack of rights and subjectivity but also a filling up with other rights and identities...capable of forming a complicated network of relationships (Rossanda 1985).

Housework is not only socially unrecognized, servile, isolated and heavy work but also something else:

It produces use values, in exchange for which it receives greater or lesser degrees of power in the interpersonal field of the family and the couple. Women are experts in this type of power, based on the idea of love, affection, seduction. The institutional value of all this is worth nothing, but its social value, its value in terms of life, is enormous. (Rossanda 1985)

The strength of this identification with the domestic sphere is immense, as is the association of this world with that of the female world. The product is a two-gendered world, both biologically and politically.

Women have enormous social power based on the immediacy of affections but they adapt badly to institutionalized politics based on the masculine logic of power. Capable of political passion, they only act in moments of extreme tension. Their long history of oppression has converted them into brilliant conservatives or ardent anarchists, never into administrators of civil peace. (Rossanda 1985)

The organization of the family and the sexual division of labour hinder women's public participation because of their domestic responsibilities and the ideological burden of being female. It would seem, therefore, that women more frequently participate in protest movements at critical moments than in long-term, formal, institutionalized organizations that imply taking on responsibilities, dedicating time and effort to the organization and also—why not say it?—the opposition of men.

Consequently, women can either enter the public domain by adopting masculine codes, behaving like men—demanding equality—or they can set out to transform this domain by incorporating the knowledge and experience of their own sex, a historically difficult task.

### **The Private Sphere in the Public Domain: Urban Movements**

The private domain is that of the family and affections. In this sphere lies the strength of the woman/mother; it is her specialty and it is here that the ambiguity of her oppression becomes apparent. It is, therefore, decisive first to recover the public and political dimension of the domestic role and also the social forces that "create" this private sphere. Thereafter, it is important to recover the symbolic context of this widening of the private domestic role into the public world. Let us go in stages.

As organizers of family consumption, women necessarily enter into contact with institutions in the distribution sector and with the state as provider of services. There is, in effect, an obvious public dimension to women's role as housewives because they

constantly relate to those offering goods and services and to other consumers. In addition, a large part of basic consumer services are offered or regulated in a collective manner by the state (education, health, housing, transport, sanitation services, price control and so on) and the absence or deficiency of these is also felt and shared collectively. This is why the organization and defence of living conditions is a real and potential sphere of participation for women of the popular sectors at various levels: neighbourhood, community, urban, national. Moreover, at times of defeat, when popular conquests are retracted in the face of authoritarian regimes that question the level of participation and the very material conditions of existence and survival of subordinate social sectors, organizations such as these are among the few viable social movements able to answer back.

Neighbourhood movements are the typical venue for women's public participation in Latin American countries. Since the decade of the 1950s, rapid urbanization and the process of internal migration have led to a rapid increase in the urban population (especially in the largest cities). The growth of cities was not accompanied by a concurrent expansion of urban public services, to which must be added the diseconomies of scale when the size of the urban population multiplied into millions. Deficiencies in urban areas are well known and have already been carefully studied: the lack of provision of public housing, and speculative and land monopolization that rendered housing inaccessible, have led to the proliferation of squatters on empty lots and the creation of illegal settlements (shantytowns, varying in name according to the country). The provision of urban services (electricity, running water, drainage, paved roads, security, schools, health centres, recreation areas, nurseries, and so on, and, of course, collective public transport) has been and is extremely inadequate in these settlements; but these are also deficient in "legal" popular neighbourhoods.

Living conditions, and the means to carry on with the daily task of maintaining and reproducing the working population, are acutely deficient. These services can sometimes be bought on the market—which converts into shortages each individual family's strategy to increase their income level and decide on how to allocate their income. Most of the time, however, and in all cases for those services that cannot be individualized, these deficiencies can be corrected only through collective mechanisms, generally state agencies.

Consequently, collective action deriving from this situation is twofold: it makes demands on the state to provide services at the same time as generating collective action aimed at meeting some of the neighbourhoods' needs through local organization, with local autonomy. The bodies that assume these demands and possibilities for collective action are in the organic form of neighbourhood councils, development societies, neighbours' associations, and so on. There is a great variety of activities and organizations, depending on the relationship between demands and state policies and on the existing tradition of association in each community.

Numerous studies and projects of promotion and action on women's situation in the popular classes emphasize the involvement of women in the neighbourhood sphere and in demands for services. Their action and analyses are centred on women's responsibility for the reproduction and maintenance of members of their domestic unit (CEPAL 1984). This role necessarily implies women going out into the known public world of the neighbourhood, thus kindling hope for a greater participation by women in collective action to press for demands, since this can be done without contradicting—in fact rather seeming to reinforce—women's traditional role as housewife/mother.

Numerous questions are raised by this type of participation: Who are the women who participate? Who benefits from these movements? More specifically, it is relevant to ask whether the conditions under which women leave their traditional role rooted in daily life to enter the public domain, constitute a significant departure with regard to social changes in women's subordination, helping to form gender identities that put in doubt the current system of domination.

### ***Women pioneers creating a neighbourhood***

The history of a neighbourhood of Lima serves as a point of departure for the analysis of women's participation in the creation of the city. In the case of the neighbourhood of San Martín de Porres, women migrated to Lima in the 1950s. The changes in their lifecycles, tied to the history of the occupation of urban land, are crucial aspects in establishing their new identities as migrants in the city. Marriage, family, the occupation of an empty lot and building a place to live, become the pivot of their lives. Throughout the process of getting somewhere to live, women develop networks of solidarity and mutual help, as much on the basis of coming from the same province of origin as on the basis of relationships formed through daily life in the neighbourhood.

The family is fundamental: not only does it help women to put down roots and to "belong" but it also becomes a unit of social reproduction and management, given the limited labour market in the city. Those who do not have a family must create one and those who do must contribute to the family economy.

Marriage or cohabitation opens a new stage in the process of insertion into and consolidation of settlement. Women, responsible for daily reproduction, invest the first years of living as a couple in building their domestic space, while men go into the job market to earn the basic income. Relations of mutual help and spiritual kinship develop between women neighbours, protecting them from the new environment and providing solidarity with childcare. In this period, although their reproductive and domestic role is reaffirmed, women are also in almost permanent confrontation with various governmental bodies in order to consolidate their land claim.

The participation of migrant women settlers in the social movement is closely linked to the cycle of family life and the project of building the family, which, in the final instance, is the axis of urban settlement. For this reason, their presence in local mobilizations to obtain services for the neighbourhood is basically fortuitous and unstructured. Their participation is instigated by the need to have certain guarantees from the state in order to consolidate their land and domestic and family unity, but it does not necessarily include an orientation toward social change nor does it have a defined political objective.

Nevertheless, confrontations with other institutions and learning about democratic forms of participation—even when carried out from the domestic sphere to obtain very basic objectives—begin to predispose men as much as women into accepting other social practices in women. The case study showed the passage from the situation of the *waqcha* ("poor", "orphan", "without ties of kinship"), migrant women on their own in the city in the early 1970s, to the present self-image of pioneers who recall with pride the path of their struggles. This is a process of creating subjects.

Women's active presence in the family, a unit of social reproduction but not strictly domestic, opens new spaces for popular female participation and transforms the initial idea that situated women within the confines of the family.

More recently, the economic crisis and its repercussions in popular sectors—so far as unemployment grows and the purchasing power of salaries decreases—have led to a new situation. In many cases women are forced to carry the full weight of the family economy or to contribute in a systematic fashion. This reality has compelled them to go out and find paid work. But as they have few qualifications, the alternatives open to them are basically casual and domestic work. Hence, another of women's needs is further training to obtain qualifications that will enable them to earn a larger income in order to maintain their families.

The mothers' clubs—local venues bringing women together that initially developed as forms of institutionalizing the self-help between women, clearly influenced by government assistance agencies or Christian groups—are now beginning to take on a protagonistic role. Collective kitchens are strategies emerging from this context that propose a new form of female organization. They are characterized by bringing women together in a public activity replacing the private and almost intimate activity of the kitchen in the domestic sphere. Collective kitchens are the new scenario for women's political work. Sustained by the acceptance of differences in the socialization of males and females in the patriarchal system, they are proposed as a necessity in view of female responsibility for social reproduction under conditions of marginalization and domination and nurtured by the history of female participation to consolidate the family. A new space is opened to women of the popular sectors enabling them to partake in social confrontation, decision making and supervision as social and political subjects.

The development of such specifically female organizations as popular kitchens is significant, because it encapsulates in a single space actions aimed at bolstering incomes, women's domestic chores and activities of a communal and social nature. In this way, new areas of social organization emerge, grouping women around a basic problem, such as food, transferring a fundamentally private and domestic chore to the public and collective domain, encouraging the socialization of individual tasks and, in many cases, the socialization of individual problems that are recognized as social problems. This trend implies learning about forms of organization and the exercise of horizontal and democratic relations between members, as well as interacting with other institutions, and it begins to constitute a new scene of social action for women of the popular strata to press for their demands.

The widening of women's sphere of action and traditional roles, as much in the sexual division of labour as in the public and private arena, is coming about through necessity in popular daily practice and as a response to the needs of survival. This implies that they are not put forward as demands nor can they be considered the achievements of a process of becoming aware of a situation of subordination. Their potential for change is, however, significant.

### ***“Women's talk/political things”***

Women's participation in the world of the neighbourhood—originally linked to satisfying the reproductive needs of the family—can have complex, subversive implications for the traditional order and ways of organizing. Teresa Caldeira's work on women in the neighbourhoods of São Paulo aims to highlight the symbolic and cultural content developing as a result of this participation.

Caldeira distinguishes various forms and types of women's participation in neighbourhood affairs. First, there are women who, without belonging to any movement or institution, are concerned about their living conditions and organize petitions and

address the corresponding public institutions. They do not want to organize anyone nor necessarily secure things for the whole neighbourhood, and instead are often satisfied with obtaining improvements in their own street. They are typical housewives, married with children, without paid work outside the home, whose political activism is clearly an extension of their domestic role, accepting clientelism and subordination.

The activism of these women coexists, with varying degrees of harmony, with that of women who participate in local movements or institutions and who speak in the name of the people and voice their demands in a discourse focused on the interests of the neighbourhood as a whole. The meaning of this participation for the women is clearly different from the justification they give for their actions. Women appeal to their condition as mothers to justify leaving the home. This implies a widening of their role as mothers: to make demands and participate are seen as a responsible mother's duty because, in a hostile city such as São Paulo, it is necessary to face public authorities and press for the collective goods and services required for reproduction.

The meaning of their activism is to be found elsewhere—in the distinction they make between “women's talk” and “political things” when referring to topics they like or dislike talking about. It also indicates a space in which women include themselves and another from which they exclude themselves. Within this context, women emphasize those forms of participation close to the sphere of “women's talk” as positive and do not conceive of their activism as political. Politics is something distant, a space in which they do not know how to act, while local movements and Christian Base Communities are spaces known to them.

They clearly distinguish between what they do and what they categorize as “political”, that is, between the immediate interests of the neighbourhood “of the people” and something distant and strange that takes place in another sphere “between them out there”. The struggle for power involves a struggle for personal interests and is “theirs”; “ours” involves struggling for collective interests, for needs.

This contrast has a further characteristic that is associated with gender differences. A new identity is created in contrast with two already known experiences: that of the traditional housewife and that of the man in politics. Although it is justified in terms of their role as responsible mothers and housewives, the new experience means that the private sphere is also beginning to be transformed. Women are absent more, they leave domestic chores undone. They participate because of the value they attribute to “knowing”, the possibility of losing their fear and learning to speak in public—all of which increases their self-esteem. In contrast, alone at home, women do not learn.

Participation also has a non-instrumental significance. The content of what they are going to do is less important than the actual going out and meeting people to do it. This explains in part the transforming effect of sexual segregation, which can lead to small changes in women's role. It seems difficult to leave the house and legitimize participation, it seems difficult to enter into the world of the job market identified as masculine, it seems difficult to find their place in a pre-established world—hence the attempt to find a form of public activism that is separate from the sphere considered as strongly masculine and competitive, where individual interests are delineated and on which images of corruption and filth weigh heavily.

### ***Housewives and the political juncture***

During those periods when the process of democratization of a country is at stake, all actions and movements take on a political colour—a meaning that has to be declared from

the code of their contribution to building democracy. Such is the case of housewives in Argentina in the past years. The case studied by Feijóo and Gogna (1985) was a movement that surpassed the limits of the neighbourhood or locality. Do extensions of space and widening of significance necessarily coexist?

The protests of housewives began during the final years of the dictatorship (1981–1982) in the greater Buenos Aires area. The growing deterioration of the standard of living and the impact caused by the Falklands/Malvinas war led a group of middle-class women to “confront the dictatorship” in their own way by preparing leaflets that urged people to “cast their fear aside”, getting women neighbours interested in their proposals, speaking to shopkeepers, linking up with neighbourhood associations and facing the authority’s threats. At first the mobilization grew, but later shrank—overshadowed by the electoral process and the concentration of public attention on the theme of institutional democratization. Once the new government was installed the housewives reinitiated their activities, which continue with ups and downs although their presence is not very visible in the mass media and public awareness.

There are new features in this movement, linked to the moment of political transition in which it emerged. First, different types of women merge in the movement, some have political experience with a history of neighbourhood action, and others are without previous experience in social and political movements. This heterogeneous group of women distances itself as much from politics as it does from connotations of welfare. This trait is shared with other women’s movements.

A second feature arises from the type of relations established with other social movements, especially those related to human rights and those pressing for women’s rights. Although it is a movement for demands that does not go beyond the framework of sporadic protests, in the specific period under analysis the housewives manifested an opening up to subjects that were non-traditional in their sector. Faced with the visible presence of other democratic and renovating social movements, the housewives developed an activity that, on the one hand, recognized their specific sphere of action in defence of women’s role in reproduction and as consumers and, on the other, showed signs of participation in wider matters: solidarity with human rights movements, participation in activities linked to women’s issues. In a seemingly contradictory fashion, through their discourse appealing to the identity of wife/mother/housewife, women are considered active protagonists pressing for their rights: “that women may have the necessary time and their own money and, above all, equality of rights”.

### ***Public politicized domesticity: Scope and limitations***

What is achieved by this participation stemming from women’s domestic role? What is the balance? There are some irrefutable points concerning the effects of these collective actions. First, they force political and social recognition of the public face of reproduction, relieving women of part of the load and responsibility (with its measure of guilt) for the conditions in which the family is maintained. Second, women learn about participation and solidarity, which is necessary in order to create a gender identity—although the degree of progress in creating female “spaces” varies from case to case, as does awareness of this fact on the part of women themselves. Third, as the forms of association generated by these practices are inserted into pre-existing systems of social relations based on traditional clientelistic channels, the tensions provoked in this way open up a great potential for change in this type of social relation.

Conversely, it must be pointed out that this type of participation does not automatically lead to the recognition of women's rights. Like the process of building a new gender identity and the establishment of women as new social actors, it is the result of a series of factors, particularly the relations established between the women's neighbourhood movements and other social and political, popular, democratic and feminist movements.

Over and above those achievements linked to the immediate socioeconomic situation (that is, the justification for action: the crisis, poverty) is the shattering of the passive image of women and the transformation of this passivity into combativeness that is moving toward the redefinition of the collective practices of women. The cases studied demonstrate the socialization of the ultimate symbol of private domestic activity—food. External activities transform the sense of domestic time, changing the orientation of women's time from being geared to the needs of others, to time for themselves. In other words, politicization as a result of the inertia of the political juncture.

### **In Search of Equality: Incorporation or Institutional Change?**

Women's subordination and discrimination can be interpreted as the banners of the struggle for justice and equality, seeking to extend to the discriminated or subordinate group rights already enjoyed by other social categories. The classic concept of citizenship is a perfect reflection of this problem, in terms of the historic processes of forming the nation state and building democracy.

Women's struggles for the recognition of their citizenship have been long and tenacious. First, the suffragettes' victory and the extension of voting rights; then changes in civil rights—the recognition of woman as an economic and social subject; and, finally, equality in the field of family rights. The fulfilment of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is a goal still to be achieved.

Equality, however, is not only a legal struggle. The field of social practices is especially complex: legal equality does not guarantee equality in reality and the inertia of "male" social organizations is very strong. But in some of these fields, particularly labour, the theme of equality is permeated by women's specific situation, which is linked to the sexual division of labour and maternity.

Perhaps unions are the sphere in which some of these questions are posed in paradigm: an institution fighting to extend workers' rights but also a classically male institution. How do women establish their place as workers with rights? How can they fight for recognition of their right to equal working conditions without discrimination? Their demands relate to pay, labour relations, access to the labour market and access to workers' organizations. Historically, women's access to these organizations has been limited because of competition in the labour market and the possible "subversion" of women's family role (Baxandall 1976).<sup>4</sup>

Consequently, women workers have a double struggle: as workers and as women. In no other place is the convergence of class and gender as visible as in the process of

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<sup>4</sup> For example, Baxandall (1976) suggests that women's awareness of their double role—as workers and consumers—would generate greater motivation to struggle for other demands unrelated to wages (humanization of work, childcare provision, and so on) that are neglected by workers' movements led by men.

organizing women workers. Should they integrate into male workers' organizations or should they organize themselves separately? The first option benefits the class struggle but retains gender subordination. The second benefits the gender aspect but causes class "divisions".

These are the historical dilemmas of the labour movement that have emerged repeatedly under varying circumstances. How is this subject tackled now that women's issues have gained legitimacy and space in the social debate? It is also a period of political repression of the labour movement (Chile) or of incipient and weak openings (Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay). What influence does this have? How is it affected by a context of economic recession or limited expansion?

It is not surprising to find that women's participation in union organizations is limited in countries with varying degrees of development.<sup>5</sup> Studying women's practices in relation to union organization provides an insight into the ways in which women are incorporated into male organizations: are they participants with equal rights and duties, or do they bring a different perspective—interests, practices, ideas, symbols—presenting a "female approach" into the sphere of formal organizations?<sup>6</sup>

Their struggles are timid, their presence minimal. Let us take a look at some specific cases.

### **The Brazilian case**

In Brazil, in contrast to other countries in the region, during the 1970s women were incorporated in large numbers into assembly industries (Gitahy et al. 1982; Abramo 1985). In São Paulo especially, large contingents of women were integrated into metal-mechanic industries, while simultaneously there was a decrease in their importance in other more traditional branches, such as textiles, clothing and food (Humphrey 1983). Parallel to this process was an increase in women's unionization in the first half of the decade.

While for some this increase is simply a reflection of the general increase in the number of women in the workforce, others consider that the real attraction was the welfare services offered by the unions. A third interpretation links the increase in female unionization to women's increased participation in urban popular movements (neighbourhood movements, Christian Base Communities, and so on) during the 1970s. In this sense, the process of female unionization was registered as part of the overall movement to appropriate and reformulate public space (Blay 1982). What is certain is that, even with the growth of unionization, women do not substantially participate in unions (Souza Lobo 1984) and women's demands are not incorporated into the final stages of union negotiations.

Analysts and actors coincide in the view that there is an emergence of the woman's question in Brazilian unionism. What has led to its appearance in the unions' discourse? It is due in part to the restoration of union practices that came about at the end of the 1970s (work centred on factory matters and changes in the forms of articulating neighbourhood demands) and in part to the activities of women's movements, which by giving greater "visibility" to women, legitimized the treatment of these issues at union level (Souza Lobo 1984; Castilhos Brito 1984).

<sup>5</sup> Baxandall 1976; Chang and Ducci 1977; Gitahy et al. 1982; Hartman Strom 1983.

<sup>6</sup> A recent report on the situation of women in Argentine unionism (Gogna 1986) indicates that there are women's departments or secretariats in the following trade unions: Insurance Union, Banking Association, Argentine Teachers' Union, Association of Public Employees, Argentine Graphic Union, Union of Tobacco Workers, Argentine Federation of Public Health Workers, University of Buenos Aires Personnel Association and National Civil Servants Union.



The two forms of action taken by women unionists were: the formation of women's commissions in the unions, which took on board relations between women workers and the union, and the struggle to integrate women into the union structure (Souza Lobo 1984). These strategies, however, were not wholly successful because of different practices between the sexes, as was proved by the lack of continuity in organizational experiences. This situation led to some sectors suggesting that if the two sexes had different issues, practices and forms of participation, then the strategies adopted by the unions should reflect this. More specifically, it has been suggested that the fact that women have collective forms of resistance within the factory could be of greater importance than their participation in the union (Castilhos Brito 1984).

Opinion was divided within the women's movement and between unionists with regard to the question of women's sections in unions. Some women and men favoured the creation of women's commissions to help organize women's struggles and to raise the level of awareness about women's problems within the union. Other women felt that these commissions could marginalize women's struggles within the unions (TIE 1984).

Women's union participation in Brazil culminated in the now renowned First Congress of Women Metal Workers, which took place in January 1978, organized by the leaders of the metal workers union of San Bernardo. This experience was later extended (from 1980 onward) to other branches of production and to other cities. In the first place, as in many other cases, the Congress was organized with the intention of attracting women to the general union struggle and not with a view to mobilizing them around their own situation as women workers (Humphrey 1983).

The majority of women who participated in the Congress later lost their jobs. There was a wide range of denunciations and claims, many of which related to women's specific working conditions: differences in salaries (women earned on average 60 per cent of men's wages); disastrous hygiene and safety conditions for women; supervisors' strict control of the use of the toilets; obligatory overtime and threats of dismissal if workers refused; constant increases in the rhythm of production; lack of stability in employment (marriage and pregnancy were the main reasons for dismissal); racial discrimination; and sexual harassment by managers and supervisors.

In summary, although it was difficult to maintain women's permanent participation in union activities due to the social circumstances that define women's role, their high level of participation in the 1978-1979 strikes constitutes an outstanding example of learning, of the possibilities of participation, and of overcoming some of the barriers imposed by female socialization in exercising political activities (Castilhos Brito 1984).

### ***The Argentine case***

The situation of women in Argentina is not fundamentally different from that in the region as a whole. Women workers are found at the delegate level but generally they do not obtain high posts in the hierarchy within their respective organizations (Gil 1970). This was clearly the situation in Argentina at the beginning of the 1970s. Within this framework, women's secretariats began to be created in some of the service occupational groups (insurance and banking). In addition, during the last Peronist government (1973-1976) there was an attempt to organize the first women's congress of the General Worker's Confederation. But, because of the general situation of crisis in the country and within the Peronist movement at the time, this did not take place.

Trade union organizations were dismantled during the dictatorship, but what was the situation with the return of a constitutional regime?

First, some facts are drawn to the attention of the observer: the creation of women's sections or secretariats in a growing number of trade unions;<sup>7</sup> the appeal to women in the 1984 union election campaigns; the formation at the end of that year of the Women Unionists Board (formed by 14 trade unions, mainly of the service sector) and (in July 1985) the creation of the National Movement of Union Women—both of which defined their objective as contributing to the organization of women workers but departing from different internal tendencies within the union and from different approaches to women's issues. Can we consider this to be the emergence of the "women's question" within Argentine unionism?

If this is the case, then the phenomenon is coming about in a very different context to that of Brazil. The participation of Argentine women workers in the manufacturing sector has decreased over the past 20 years, at first due to technological modernization at the beginning of the 1960s but later because of the economic policies of the military dictatorship (Sautu 1985).

Argentine unionism finds itself in the middle of profound changes connected with the process of political democratization (Palomino 1985; Abós 1985) and reflected in greater political pluralism in proceedings; growing connections with other social movements; and changes in the relative power of certain trade unions as a result of the economic crisis, among other factors. Under these conditions, there is possibly more receptivity than in the past to such challenges as the recognition of women's issues.

Only time will tell what will happen to these tentative attempts to achieve greater participation of women in the trade union sphere. For the moment, one can formulate the hypothesis that contacts with feminist groups and political women—as well as some union leaders' experience of exile during the dictatorship—have exerted a certain degree of influence on some of the women who are instigating these orientations in the sense of encouraging proposals of equality but also through a growing reassessment of women's role in society.

### ***The Chilean case***

Women's participation in trade union organizations in Chile is faced with additional problems to those already mentioned in this section. The repressive situation, which has existed for over a decade, and the acute economic crisis are reflected in very high unemployment figures. As Gálvez and Todaro (1989) show, the situation is very similar to the rest of the region as regards the factors that bring women into the job market and that are closely linked to the possibilities of trade union organization: women are concentrated in occupations in which it is more difficult to organize unions and where their derived benefits are fewer.

Permanent harassment and lack of recognition of rights by the company and in the daily routine of the working world lead to a rejection of the work environment by women workers, making the possibilities of organization even more difficult and resulting in a sort of idealization of domestic work, which comes to be seen as a refuge. But signs are beginning to appear of an ideology questioning both these roles.

Furthermore, if we take into account the fact that women's union organization is limited by domestic functions, both in terms of material (time, working hours) and

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<sup>7</sup> I am grateful to Mónica Gogna for her collaboration in the preparation of this and the following section.

ideological obstacles (rejection of “politics”, fear of participating in public, and so on) then the overall outlook is disappointing. In this context, it is not surprising that women participate more enthusiastically in those union activities linked to services (the annual outing, the Christmas presents given by the union, and so on) than in the process of struggle or negotiation, which appears more distant and is, in effect, risky.

In the repressive conditions of the Chilean regime, the parties and unions have adopted a distant attitude to the problems of women workers and given greater priority to other subjects. First, as in other countries, class contradictions tend to obscure awareness of gender. This is evident in the somewhat generalized belief that gender problems are individual problems that do not require collective action. The trade union organizations themselves scarcely consider the specific problems of women workers and do not take them on board as collective problems of the workforce. Furthermore, women unionists themselves recognize that they have not yet found alternatives to the working methods used traditionally in the trade union sphere and therefore have no way of taking into account women’s specific work relationships and removing the above-mentioned obstacles to their participation indicated above.

In the union world, attempts to establish a forum to mobilize women (such as the creation of a Women’s Department in the National Union Coordinator in 1979, which organized a number of national women’s meetings) typify the tensions aroused in these cases. The objective on the part of the union movement appeared to be to motivate women’s participation in the struggle for democracy in the terms put forward. The existence of an important feminist movement in the country, which has led numerous demonstrations in opposition to the regime, combining the issue of democracy with demands for social changes in women’s role, necessarily affects women in the unions as well. The dilemma of whether to incorporate women into male union organizations or search for autonomous organizational alternatives is very salient today in Chile.

### ***The peasants of Bolivia***

The identity of peasant women is more complex than that of women workers whose role is defined by the labour market. Who is a peasant woman and in what capacity does she become a member of women’s organizations? How is the potential scope of membership defined? Applying parallel criteria to those used in union organization—and the peasant movement, particularly in Bolivia but also in other countries, is indeed organized and forms a part of the workers’ movement—the labour situation ought to define the peasant, that is, agricultural work with different characteristics. But what does being a peasant woman imply? The definition of this role does not appear to be the labour situation but more precisely the family situation: to be a member of a peasant family. Labour does not define status. In the first place, the scope of women’s productive work in this social organization can be very varied, depending on the presence of men or their absence due to migration, and the tasks of marketing or transport outside the domestic peasant unit as part of the actual organization of production. Second, it always includes tasks aimed at daily and generational reproduction. These tasks might be called “domestic” in other social organizations but in the peasant sphere their specifically reproductive character is confused with productive tasks. Women who are physically separated from their peasant families (domestic workers in the city, for example) can also be called “peasants”, as their work is part of a diversification strategy in the division of labour scheme within the peasant family. In summary, what defines or characterizes peasant women is the fact that

they function within or belong to a peasant family and not the fact that they carry out specific tasks outside the domestic sphere.

This multiplicity of tasks and lack of definition of roles influence forms of organization and participation. The organization of peasant women studied by Rosario León (1990), the Bartolina Sisa Federation of Peasant Women, follows the union format in its organization. But the reality of peasant women renders such organizations inadequate. The combination of contradictions resulting from the position of peasant women (not to mention women leaders) is reflected in the interviews of their leaders:

When women try to organize themselves, they ask their husbands first; women don't make decisions on their own. But the time has come for we women to think for ourselves and form our own organizations. I think that women must also learn how to govern. Why should it only be men who rule? Just as Bartolina Sisa struggled alongside Tupac Katari, so too must peasant women struggle beside their husbands. A lot is said about peasant liberation but they only seem to take men into account. What about women? Don't women also need to be liberated? (Mejía de Morales 1984:10)

We were really happy when we heard that a woman had been named President.<sup>18]</sup> We said: 'There will be a solution because she's a woman, she'll regard us as her sisters'. Thinking this, a group of women from my community went to give her a present—a *tarilla*<sup>19]</sup> that had the name of Bartolina Sisa and of our community woven into it. But she refused to see us, even though we pleaded. She made us wait there all day and, finally, when she saw us in the afternoon, it was only in the waiting room. We also wanted to shower her with confetti but she didn't want that either. She said she had to go somewhere and anyway we would dirty the floor, that's what she said to us. So we presented her with the *tarilla* and a document asking for support. Then we left.

When we returned to our community we arrived almost at the same time as news of the economic measures which she had authorized. Our male colleagues made fun of us: 'So there you have it, nice isn't it? You go and congratulate her and now she's punishing us with these measures'. That's what they said to us. We felt morally defeated but we also learned from this. Just because we are all women doesn't mean we are all the same. (Mejía de Morales 1984:16)

We don't know whether she's a peasant woman or not, if she has a cause or not, if she has suffered or not, but she can't be a peasant. We have known suffering, ours is an uphill struggle. We will disown her because she is betraying women. This union is a disunion.

If she were really a peasant woman, she would know that in joint meetings with men, we women find it difficult to speak, men always outdo us because we're afraid to speak. But in women-only meetings, we have a good discussion, we're not afraid to throw out ideas, we understand each other quickly without needing so many words and we talk about women's things—which we cannot do in front of men. But in a mixed group we clam up. Now we know what we would be losing if we joined with men. That's why we will fight so as not to lose what we have already won. (Mejía de Morales 1984:18)

We are beginning to grow up, as a young girl dependent on her father becomes aware and breaks away, so have we. Women could not have formed the Federation at that time because we didn't know the steps to take. But we have organized the Confederation by our own means...

We organized courses on handicrafts and cooperatives, to keep in touch, so the organization didn't lose strength. These served to keep us informed about how the

<sup>8</sup> This refers to Lidia Gueiler, who was elected President of Bolivia.

<sup>9</sup> *Tarilla*—diminutive of *tari*, which is a small rectangular piece of cloth used for holding coca; it is also essential for "seeing in coca". (Aymara)

organization was going, what was happening in each section. We met in the parishes, where we cooked, slept, did everything. (Mejía de Morales 1984:43)

The initial organizational practices followed the logic of the Unified Syndical Confederation of Rural Workers of Bolivia (CSUTCB), the institution that promoted the women's organization. The Federation of Peasant Women was created from the top down, by setting up national structures first and, later, as a result of leaders' visits, establishing unions in different localities. Nevertheless, this form of union organization and participation does not go against but rather complements forms of organization in daily life: networks of provisions, kinship and interlocal solidarity. In as much as these forms of association of peasant women are part of daily life and their domestic and local sphere, they go unnoticed, they are socially invisible. This is why in times of social and political repression they are able to play a "clandestine" role, which is what happened following the coup d'état in July 1980. Unions gave way to alternative forms of organization that were used to plan the resistance.

The activities of the Federation of Peasant Women began in 1982 with the return of a democratic regime in Bolivia. The period that followed was characterized by differences and conflicts among its leadership and by attempts to manipulate politically an organization that had demonstrated its mobilizing power.

Predictably, the conflictive nature of Bolivian society began to manifest itself openly within the Federation and in relations between the Federation and left-wing political parties on the one hand, and the Confederation on the other. The Confederation attempted to neutralize the Federation's autonomy, creating a portfolio of "female membership" whose activities included taking charge of peasant stores, which in effect was a return to women's traditional role. At the same time, the Federation's development led to greater coordination with other women's organizations, to learning about other forms of action and to a transformation of women's demands.

### ***A digression: "We want to retrieve our past"***

We want to retrieve our past, our history, to combine it with the history we are making now, because in order to advance you need to look at what went before. (Mejía de Morales 1984:83)

The evidence of the formation of women's movements in rural areas in the past decade leads immediately to the question of whether this is new or whether there is a record of such movements in the past. How did the identification with Bartolina Sisa arise? Or in more abstract terms: Which cultural pattern led to the emergence of these practices?

The memory of Bartolina Sisa is of a woman fighter who accompanied Tupac Katari. This role of peasant women is also clear in the testimonies and recollections of peasant struggles prior to 1952 (Rivera 1987). Women carried out a great variety of activities in the process of peasant struggles—both in reclaiming territories and in resisting the expansion of estates or resisting forced and violent recruitment of the workforce for the army or production. For the mothers, wives and daughters of peasant leaders to accompany them in their struggles was considered a priority.

The position of the leaders' female family members was different from that of other peasant women. Whereas the former had to give their support to the men's militancy and replace them in productive work, the dominant tone of the latter was passive resignation in the face of forces over which they had no control. This is reflected in the testimonies:

No, no they didn't participate...the women stayed at home.

'I just know how to listen, I don't know how to participate in anything, I don't know how to get involved in men's things.'

They didn't understand, women have little intelligence, that's what they're like. (Rivera Cusicanqui 1990:159)

This resigned acceptance of decisions by women raises two questions. First, could it be that they were hiding resistance practices that were neither mentioned nor accorded social recognition? Second, how did women begin to participate actively and consciously?

The methodology for finding an answer to these questions is clear: the search must begin by investigating the daily life of peasant women, as this is what shapes their perception of the world and society. In apparently trivial events that went unnoticed, in numerous insignificant daily and domestic chores, women developed a practice—often not accompanied by a concurrent reflection on the matter—of resistance and change. First, let us consider some images of the position of women and the complementarity between men and women:

Between themselves, man and woman have to help each other. But the woman works more: she has to cook the food, wash the clothes, carry the babies, graze the sheep, weave ponchos, sacks, *lliqllas*<sup>10</sup> for babies, women must do all this. Perhaps you don't work very hard, but here in the countryside women have to take the cows out, take all sorts of things into town, sow potatoes and grains...phew! A woman has to do a bit of everything. She has to help her man a lot if she loves him. Do you think he can manage on his own? If we cut the wing off a bird, will it be able to fly? With only one wing it can't. Man-woman are always willing to do anything, but the woman does more.

My husband went to the meeting where they spoke of many things, what could they have been talking about? But my husband didn't tell me everything they had said, just a few things and, when I asked him what had happened, he said: 'This and that'.

But I knew they had said a lot more. So I followed him to hear what they were talking about and find out everything. Some men go on their own and then they tell us very little. I want to know a lot more. But if they don't want me to speak, I say: 'If a woman knows then she can express her opinion and discuss with the rest. We women could learn and speak together, just among ourselves and it would be good, there would be enough of us then. I and other women could participate better with women that have a mind like yours. If there were ten with a good brain we could do a lot: many women could meet together with everything that we are told and what we learn.'" (Rivera Cusicanqui 1990:172)

Everyday practices are linked to the defence of life; some of them develop out of resignation and passivity while others generate important collective action. Women's activities are rooted in a very strong cultural image of the complementary (hierarchical) couple. This defines their activities, which are almost always accompanied by rituals:

- Taking over when men weaken.
- Complementing jobs in agricultural production, reproduced in resistance practices.
- Lessening the effects of defeat, as "women will humble themselves and beg the master's forgiveness with the intention of at least saving their partner's life and regrouping the community" (Rivera Cusicanqui 1990).

It is traditional for Andean women to express resistance to the impositions of an oppressive society through their clothing.

The tenacity of this act of defiance, carried out in silent but meaningful gestures, illustrates that women were very conscious of the symbolism of their clothing and weaving. We

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<sup>10</sup> *Lliqllas*—A square woven cloth or blanket, usually multicoloured, used by women for carrying their baby on their backs. Also used by women and men to carry loads on their backs.

consider that this sensitivity is due not only to the fact that women are the producers of the family's clothing but also because in the woven textiles, as in a silent text, they generate a language full of complex meanings which enables them to express the distinct identity of the community. (Rivera Cusicanqui 1990)

Finally, there is the role of cultural resistance through rituals that appears to be linked to mediation with malicious forces that penetrate the community's boundaries. By examining the underlying cultural elements involved in these practices of resistance and affirmation of an ethnic identity, new significance can be attributed to women's silent message:

In the light of these reflections we would suggest that the 'silence' of Andean women in the context of intercultural relations, is a deliberate form of anonymity, which contrasts with their verbal eloquence within the *ayllu*<sup>11</sup> or family. This anonymity complements the male activity relating to the *q'ara*<sup>12</sup> world by means of the word (files, documents, petitions), which places the man in a vulnerable and intermediary space. Female silence could therefore be said to constitute a cultural self-defence mechanism: to protect the man from the dangers of his links with the *q'ara* world and to reproduce the cultural and moral values of their own origins. (Rivera Cusicanqui 1990:178)

In the face of recollections of cultural resistance, the present situation of the peasant women's organization appears enigmatic. The multiplicity of meanings and symbols involved in the process of forming the Federation is accompanied by a multidimensional range of identities, each trying to assert itself: increasingly less perfunctory and more combative demands for women's equality, coexisting with the importance of being *de pollera* (wearing indigenous dress), together with all the connotations of cultural resistance surrounding this symbol of traditional dress; the appeal to the figure of Bartolina Sisa—deeply rooted in the complementary hierarchy of the couple—to request an autonomous women's movement. In summary, a proposal that essentially questions accepted forms of social organization, but which stems from the collective memory of traditional cultural resistance.

## Conclusions

This chapter is comparatively less rich in information and working hypotheses than those referring to women's participation in other spheres of social life, except in the case of peasant women and the retrieval of their historical memory. There are a number of reasons for this. The most obvious is that, owing to factors referred to in this chapter, women have not been actively incorporated in our society's trade unions. To what extent can this be said to be a true absence, and to what extent is it a matter of degrees of "social visibility" or of gaps in knowledge? Are women's experiences in unions not also a part of these struggles, which by their very nature tend to be left out of historical records and therefore need to be retrieved from oblivion? Some data found in historical studies on women's union activities do indicate that struggles for participation are not new in this sphere, although they were never massive (Navarro 1986).

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<sup>11</sup> *Ayllu*—Kindred community or territory covering various strata of Andean social organization, from the smallest (homestead or chapter house) to the large or maximum strata (Platt 1976, cited in Rivera Cusicanqui 1998:216) covering extensive multi-ecological territories and grouping confederation of *ayllus* organized into two halves (*Aransaya/Urinsaya; Alasaya/Masaya*) (Aymara and Quechua).

<sup>12</sup> *Q'ara*—Literally, "bald", "naked". It refers to the Spaniards, criollos or white mestizos who, to the Indians, secularly represent colonial abuse and oppression (Aymara).

Women's limited participation in the union sphere, difficult at the best of times, is even more reduced under sociopolitical circumstances, such as those imposed by dictatorial governments that repress all forms of participation. Unionism is an especially vulnerable target in these situations because it is a channel of participation for subordinate sectors, highly institutionalized, easily recognizable and visible to government agencies. If a target is to be chosen for repression, the union movement is the easiest: much easier than spontaneous non-institutional social movements, because of its visibility; much easier than other organizations (those of the Church, for example) because of its overt identification with the interests of the subordinate social sectors.

This curb on participation obviously affects men as well as women, but it does not affect them in the same way. The historical juncture we are analysing occurred at a time when on other fronts—both at the Latin American level and, more especially, at the international level—the question of women's status was gaining relevance and bearing, if not legitimacy, as a social issue to be confronted by the state and by social organizations. The fact that, at the time, unionism was restricted in its scope of action meant a considerable delay in the formulation of the issue. But as we have seen in the Argentine and Brazilian cases, we can begin to detect new embryonic forms of participation and especially new ways of putting forward women's issues in the union world. Something similar is happening in Uruguay where, for example, women from neighbourhood groups, workers and students were members of the Commission of Uruguayan Women, created in 1983 by housewives associated with the Construction Union. One of its objectives is to ensure that women's demands are taken up by unions and that women have greater participation in union life (Rodríguez Villamil 1984).

Evidently, the coincidence between democratic opening and the appearance or deepening of the theme of women within the trade union sphere is not fortuitous. Nevertheless, global recognition of the existence of a specific issue related to women and the difficulties they encounter in participating are longer term issues linked to union structure. Equality in terms of power within labour organizations is a demand that is still not mentioned, that is silenced.

### **Daily Life in Politics or Women and a Democratic Utopia**

In a certain sense, the social action and movements we have analysed here are prototypes that arise "naturally" out of daily life. Women's lives and identities are made up of daily events: the habitual, the trivial and insignificant, the invisible. The world of big events has little to do with them, at least for most of them. And yet, in their daily reality, women live the manifestations and consequences of great historical dramas. At the same time, daily life can be transformed and come to influence public, social life. Because of their social position, women can become the key social protagonists in forming social movements that question the traditional way of engaging in politics, the relation between politics and social life, and the very nature of social relationships. For this to happen and how it will happen depends on the historical conditions and the development of the social forces themselves. And it is here that we can finally move on from the level of description and interpretation of reality, to the level of social utopias and potential for change in women's daily practices.

The attempt by the authoritarian regimes, which devastated the region (or are still doing so) to redefine the limits of legitimacy of political action contributed paradoxically



to the politicization of spheres traditionally considered non-political. This phenomenon has been particularly clear with regard to women, who in various cases organized themselves in new ways, having recognized the political profile of their family roles (Feijóo 1983; Jelin 1984). Without a doubt the most significant has been women's mobilization to denounce violations of human rights. Although recognizing that this phenomenon is more widespread than the Argentine case,<sup>13</sup> in some ways the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo have become the paradigm of women's struggles in defence of human rights.

The Mothers raise new ethical banners; the appeal for a fundamental system of values: "life, truth and justice, expound an ethical need for humanitarian principles" then becomes a project: "[H]uman rights are now no longer just those that existed before and must be respected, but those that follow and must be established. They are presented as a horizon, as a utopia" (Sondereguer 1985).

The type of action in which these women engage does not restrict itself to the traditional rules of politics but attempts to give a new meaning to politics: "We don't defend ideologies, we defend life".

The case of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo must be similar to other women's movements where participation was provoked by political events that "hit them" and that, without their doing anything, began changing women's consciousness and role. By emphasizing matters such as justice, liberty or solidarity, the Mothers in a certain sense defied the privatization and isolation of women. They also shattered the myth that women are incapable of uniting and of showing solidarity among themselves and, more fundamentally, they buried the image of resignation and weakness.

Although the Mothers movement is "new" in so far as it responds to a painful and exceptional circumstance, it is possible to recognize some traits in common with other women's movements in defence of the standard of living, women's rights, and so on. In synthesis, identity (mother, housewife, woman) is a key element in understanding these movements; they all erect an ethical dimension (right to life, to a dignified life, no discrimination, for example) and, finally, they work more toward gaining control of an autonomous or independent field in the face of the system, than winning political power. These common features mean that they are confronted with similar problems, basically "their link with politics" and the fact that, for their demands to be considered, they must wait until "later": a consolidated democracy, improvements in the economic indicators, a more modern society.

It is a movement that does not distinguish between the pragmatic effectiveness of action and normative reforms, but rather expounds an ethical commitment that is not negotiable and is stated as a political utopia stemming from feelings and convictions. Theoretically, their proposal can be widened to cover a transformation of the sociopolitical space, starting from an adjustment to the world of the future, as in the Antigone paradigm:

The standpoint of Antigone is of a woman who dares to challenge public power by giving voice to familial and social imperatives and duties...To recapture that voice and to reclaim that standpoint, and not just for women alone, it is necessary to locate the daughters of Antigone where, shakily and problematically they continue to locate themselves: in the

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<sup>13</sup> So, for example, several of the human rights organizations in Uruguay—Mothers and Relatives of those Tried by Military Justice; Relatives of the Disappeared; Relatives of Exiles—are almost exclusively made up of women (Rodríguez Villamil 1984). In Chile after 1974, organizations were formed whose aim was to denounce the violation of basic human rights; they were composed mainly of women, many of whom had no previous experience of organizations (Delsing et al. 1983). In Guatemala and Peru women are also organizing around the defence of human rights.

arena of the social world where human life is nurtured and protected from day to day. This is a world women have not altogether abandoned, though it is one both male-dominant society and some feminist protests have devalued as the sphere of 'shit-work', 'diaper-talk', and 'terminal' social decay. This is a world that women, aware that they have traditions and values, can bring forward to put pressure on contemporary public policies and identities...To define this world simply as the 'private sphere' in contrast to the 'public sphere', is to mislead. For contemporary Americans, 'private' conjures up images of narrow exclusivity. The world of Antigone, however, is a social location that speaks of and to, identities that are unique to a particular family, on the one hand but, on another more basic level, it taps a deeply buried human identity; for we are first and foremost not political or economic man but family men and women. (Elshtain 1982:55-56)

But we should not deceive ourselves. The existence of ethical and democratic forces is not a "natural" part of being a woman. They are historical constructions and aspirations that, departing from the identification of women with procreation and the gestation of life, can be incorporated into a desirable future society. But what is not feasible is to imagine any sort of necessary and total automatic liberation.

### **The Global Significance of Social Movements: Citizenship and Identity**

From a theoretical perspective we can distinguish two ways of interpreting social movements based on their inclusion in the macrosocial plan. One way of understanding them, linked to the social recognition of subordinate sectors in critical moments of historical processes, involves seeing social movements as mechanisms of struggle to widen sociopolitical citizenship. It is a struggle for the recognition and legitimacy of the social presence of specific groups of the population. It is a struggle for equal rights, justice and the homogenization of society in terms of the recognition of a minimum threshold of rights associated with belonging to and inclusion in the social system. In this sense, the history of the struggle for legal equality (first suffrage, now equal parental authority) is paradigmatic.

A second way of seeing social movements is linked to the collective social search for identity and for the appropriation of a cultural field, as an affirmation of the right to specificity and difference. As discussed by Melucci in relation to feminism:

The objective of the movement is not only equality of rights but rather the right to be different. The struggle is against discrimination, and in favour of a more equitable distribution in the economic market and, in the political realm the struggle is still for citizenship. The right to be recognized as different is one of the deepest needs in post-industrial and post-material society. (Melucci 1984:830-831)

Both elements are present in the Latin American social situations that have been studied. It is a struggle to widen citizenship while simultaneously claiming social recognition of specificities—a political struggle in terms of access to the mechanisms of power, but also cultural in the search for different identities. Perhaps the Bartolina Sisa movement of peasant women is the best archetype: women with no previous political experience are instigated from above (by men), but at the same time recognize and claim their ethnic and gender specificity, and their membership of the peasant class. Reality and slogans can only be contradictory, as they are inserted in different logics of action, stemming from superimposed social positions. The historical meeting, or the temporary synchronism of processes, which tends to be viewed as being logically and historically

successive, is potentially (when not actually) innovative, both in the form and content of collective action.

The search for citizenship and the creation of an identity are both collective and active processes. The fact that we can currently study these aspects among women in Latin America is in itself an indication of who women (or at least some women) are. They are not passive beings taking refuge in privacy. They are there outside, building. But there is no guarantee of success. Moreover, the criteria of what constitutes “success” are also being shaped along the very course of history.

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## Chapter 12

# From WID to GAD: Conceptual Shifts in the Women and Development Discourse<sup>1</sup>

*Shahra Razavi<sup>2</sup> and Carol Miller<sup>3</sup>*

(1995)

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### Introduction<sup>4</sup>

This chapter sets out some of the main trends in the way women's issues have been conceptualized in the context of development over the past two decades. It begins with a discussion of the early WID (women in development) approach, highlighting in particular a dominant strand in WID thought that legitimated efforts to influence development policy with a combined argument for equity and economic efficiency. The emphasis on women's productive contributions, it was hoped, would convince planners to alter development practice so as to direct scarce economic resources to women. Although women's equity demands were thereby made "relevant" to the concerns of development planners and policy makers, the strategy also entailed a more controversial implication, one that prioritized what development needs from women over what women need from development. But WID produced more than just a political strategy; it also generated new research, including analytical evaluations of the impact on rural women of development projects.

The second part of this chapter examines the shift in policy discourse from WID to GAD (gender and development). Gender, we argue, is being used in a number of different ways. Although the analyses of gender considered in this chapter share some

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<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing, Shahra Razavi was Project Co-ordinator of Technical Co-operation and Women's Lives: Integrating Gender into Development Policy.

<sup>3</sup> At the time of writing, Carol Miller was a researcher at UNRISD.

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fundamental assumptions, there are also a number of significant points at which they diverge. One of the main tensions that emerges from our comparative account is the extent to which the “social connectedness” or “togetherness” of husband and wife is given analytical weight in analyses of gender relations. According to some accounts, the interrelations between men and women have conflictual *and* cooperative dimensions that must be taken into consideration if a “gender-aware” approach to development is to be realized.

The historical account set out in this chapter illustrates some continuities in thinking on women/gender and development that link the early WID arguments of the 1970s to the analyses of gender and structural adjustment put forward by a number of neoclassical economists in recent years. The chapter also refers to the emergence of a strong strand of feminist thinking within economics that challenges the appropriation of the concept of efficiency by neoclassical economics, and broadens the discourse of efficiency to argue for human and sustainable development. The evolution in thinking has also been punctuated by a number of shifts: from a focus on women-specific projects to mainstreaming women/gender at the programme and policy levels, and more significantly, from a reliance on top-down planning to a growing emphasis on “bottom-up” or “participatory” development strategies signifying the growing politicization of the development agenda.

The reader should be aware that the discourses under scrutiny have emerged within specific political and institutional contexts: they are, for the most part, addressed to policy makers in state and donor agency bureaucracies. They seek, in their own way, to change the world, and that very often means using discourses that will inevitably look oversimplified: campaigning for practical action often requires a bolder and simpler discourse than the complexities of empirical research. And yet there needs to be some continuity between the discourses that are used by academics, advocates and practitioners. It is with this latter point in mind that we make our way through the different texts described in the chapter.<sup>5</sup>

## Women in Development (WID)

In popular discourse, “women in development” (WID) is associated with the wide range of activities concerning women in the development domain, which donor agencies, governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have become involved in since the 1970s. The 1975 World Conference of the International Women’s Year in Mexico City and the United Nations Decade for Women (1976–1985) gave expression to the major preoccupations of women around the world: improved educational and employment opportunities; equality in political and social participation; and increased health and welfare services. In sum, the WID movement that emerged during this period demanded social justice and equity for women.

In this section we focus on a dominant strand of thinking within WID discourse, one that has attempted to make a connection between equity issues and development concerns. Instead of approaching policy makers with a range of demands for women, these WID advocates have adopted a strategy of “relevance”. In other words, their

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<sup>5</sup> Drawing on comments provided by Diane Elson (6 December 1994).

demands for the allocation of development resources to women hinge on economic efficiency arguments about what women can contribute to the development process. The convergence of equity and efficiency concerns in this strand of WID thought has provided the basis for a powerful political strategy. It has also had a lasting impact on the way in which development planners think about women. In the discussion that follows, we concentrate primarily on this strand of WID thought. However, where appropriate, we also refer to other policy approaches to women identified in Moser's (1993) fivefold schema—"welfare", "equity", "anti-poverty", "efficiency" and "empowerment".

### ***The origins of WID***

The term "women in development" was coined in the early 1970s by a Washington-based network of female development professionals (Tinker 1990:30). On the basis of their own experiences in overseas missions, they began to challenge "trickle down" theories of development, arguing that modernization was impacting differently on men and women. Instead of improving women's rights and status, the development process appeared to be contributing to a deterioration of their position.

Drawing on such evidence, women's circles in the United States lobbied congressional hearings, resulting in the 1973 Percy Amendment to the US Foreign Assistance Act. Assistance granted by the United States was thereby required to help "integrate women into the national economies of foreign countries, thus improving their status and assisting the total development effort" (cited in Tinker 1990:31).<sup>6</sup> These Washington-based circles began to network with women working in United Nations agencies and with women academics engaged in research on women's productive work, the sexual division of labour and the impact of development processes on women (Young 1993:25).

A major formative influence on WID was the resurgence of the women's movement in Northern countries in the 1970s. In addition to the WID agenda, there was the simultaneous effort by liberal feminists to get equal rights, employment, equity and citizenship for women in the United States—in other words, the idea of getting a just political system in place for American women. The liberal feminist approach has been very important globally and was critical in determining the language of political strategy used by WID advocates. Central to liberal feminism was the idea that women's disadvantages stem from stereotyped customary expectations held by men, internalized by women and promoted through various "agencies of socialization" (Connell 1987:34). It postulated that women's disadvantages can, in principle, be eliminated by breaking down these stereotypes: for example by giving girls better training and more varied role models, by introducing equal opportunity programmes and anti-discrimination legislation, or by freeing labour markets (Connell 1987:34). One implication of this approach, as many have shown, was that there was little focus on men and on power relations between men and women (see the section on Rethinking Women in Development).

One important theme of the feminist movement in this period, especially in the United States, was equal employment opportunities for women. It is not surprising therefore that, in turning to development issues, particular attention was paid to women's productive labour, rather than social welfare and reproductive concerns. While these

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<sup>6</sup> The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) set up a women in development office to promote these objectives—the first office of its kind—currently known as the Office of Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment—(GenDev).

latter concerns remained central to the women's movement in many Northern countries, in turning to developing countries, WID gave primacy to women's productive roles and integration into the economy as a means of improving their status. This focus on Third World women's productive labour was part of a strategy aimed at reformulating women's identity for development policy. Both early colonial authorities and post-war development agencies and NGOs had identified women almost solely in their roles as wives and mothers, and the policies for women were restricted to social welfare concerns such as nutritional education and home economics—often referred to as the “welfare approach”. There was scant reference to the work women undertook as producers—be it for subsistence or for the market. This was the general policy environment within which WID was born, and to which it was reacting.

The second formative influence on WID was the emerging body of research on women in developing countries; here the work of the Danish economist, Ester Boserup, was most influential. From the perspective of the WID movement, the importance of Boserup's *Women's Role in Economic Development* (1970) was that it challenged the assumptions of the “welfare approach” and highlighted women's importance to the agricultural economy. Sub-Saharan Africa was characterized as the great global area of “female farming systems” in which women, using “traditional” hoe technology, assumed a substantial responsibility for food production.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Boserup posited a positive correlation between the role women played in agricultural production and their status vis-à-vis men.

Boserup's critique of colonial and post-colonial agricultural policies was that, through their productivity-enhancing interventions and dominant Western notions about what constituted “appropriate” female tasks, they had facilitated men's monopoly over new technologies and cash crops and undermined women's traditional roles in agriculture, thereby heralding the demise of the female farming systems. This, according to Boserup, was creating a dichotomy in the African countryside where men were associated with the “modern”, cash-cropping sector and women with “traditional”, subsistence agriculture. Relegated to the subsistence sector, women lost income, status and power relative to men. More importantly, their essential contribution to agricultural production became invisible.

One reason why Boserup's work was taken up so enthusiastically by WID advocates was that “it legitimized efforts to influence development policy with a combined argument for justice and efficiency” (Tinker 1990:30). If, as Boserup suggested, women had in the past enjoyed a position of relative equality with men in agricultural production, then it was both appropriate and feasible for development assistance directed toward women to remove inequalities. Furthermore, by suggesting that in the recent past women were not only equal in status to men, but also equally productive, Boserup challenged the conventional wisdom that women were less productive and therefore unentitled to a share of scarce development resources (Jaquette 1990:61). Finally, the argument that African women had recently been equal to African men meant that “the claim that women should have more equal access to resources could not be dismissed as a ‘Western’ or ‘feminist’ import” (Jaquette 1990:59).

Drawing on the insights of Boserup's research, WID advocates rejected the narrow view of women's roles (as mothers and wives) underlying much of development policy

<sup>7</sup> This was contrasted with the more productive “traditional” farming technologies of plough agriculture, which used mainly male labour (characteristic of Asia).



concerning women. In general, a great effort has been made to distinguish WID from women's programmes carried out under the rubric of health or social welfare. Instead of characterizing women as "needy" beneficiaries, WID arguments represent women as "productive" members of society. No longer, therefore, should women be seen as passive recipients of welfare programmes but rather as active contributors to economic development. Women can thus be seen as a "missing link" in development, a hitherto undervalued economic resource in the development process (Tinker 1990:31).

WID advocates' emphasis on women's productive roles meant that women's subordination (and, by implication, overcoming that subordination) was seen within an economic framework. By explaining the difference in status and power between men and women in terms of their relative economic contributions, the origin of women's subordination was linked to their exclusion from the marketplace. It was therefore argued that if women were brought into the productive sphere more fully, not only would they make a positive contribution to development, but they would also be able to improve their status vis-à-vis men.

Boserup's work provided the intellectual underpinning for WID arguments and, as we will show below, has had a lasting impact on women and development discourse.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, Boserup's work did have its critics. Huntington (1975), for example, disagreed with Boserup's claim that women had enjoyed equal status with men in pre-colonial Africa and questioned the independence and self-sufficiency of the female farming system.<sup>9</sup> Further, she observed that if WID claims were given standing because of the acceptance of the point that women had once been equal to men in status and productivity, that standing is jeopardized by a convincing counter-argument that women have always been subjugated. Huntington's point serves as a warning that "equality should be argued on its own merits, not by creating a history of women's equality that is vulnerable to historical refutation" (Jaquette 1990:64).

Jaquette makes a similar point: articulating WID in efficiency terms means that the impetus for the allocation of scarce resources lies in the market conception of merit, that is, that productive efficiency deserves reward. A criterion of merit based on the presumption of women's equal productivity can easily be turned against women. If it can be empirically shown that women's productivity is consistently lower than men's, then it follows that they deserve fewer resources (Jaquette 1990:65). It is not surprising, therefore, that WID has given rise to numerous studies documenting rural women's contributions to agricultural productivity; it has also made serious attempts to include women's productive and reproductive contributions in GNP and labour statistics.

WID arguments aim to provide a rationale for directing scarce development resources to women. Building upon the work of Boserup and others, WID advocates claimed that failures to acknowledge and utilize women's productive roles within and beyond the household were planning errors leading to the inefficient use of resources (Tinker 1990:30). This helped to legitimate a women-only focus in research and in the delivery of resources via women's projects. By improving women's access to technology and credit, women's productivity would increase and impact positively on national

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<sup>8</sup> We use the term "women in development" (WID) to refer specifically to a particular approach to women and development issues that emerged during the 1970s, described above. By contrast, we use the term "women and development" more broadly to embrace all efforts directed at understanding and improving the situation of women in the development process, which includes WID as well as approaches using gender (that is, GAD).

<sup>9</sup> A deconstruction of Boserup's thesis can be found in Whitehead 1990.

development. One of the underlying assumptions of WID advocates is that the costs of investing in women's productivity are justifiable in terms of economic returns as well as social returns.

While we will return to this subject later, it is worth noting some of the reservations that have been voiced in this context. Whitehead warns that shifting the balance of agricultural extension services and agronomic and technological research to provide improved inputs to women "will be a very costly business". Not only are current structures and budgets not set up for this purpose, but it is also possible that it is intrinsically most costly to do this for women, given their "inaccessibility" (Whitehead 1990:464). In other words, attempts at transforming agricultural services to suit female farmers will have to be backed by strong financial and technical support.

Despite criticisms of Boserup's research and the way in which it has been taken up by WID advocates, efficiency arguments are still central to the women and development discourse. In fact, efficiency arguments have become increasingly sophisticated in recent years and form what we refer to below as the "gender efficiency approach". Concerns remain, however, that the emphasis on women's productivity ignores the impact of a broad range of social divisions and social relations that constrain women's economic choices and opportunities.

### ***Selling WID to development agencies***

The United Nations Decade for Women and its associated women's conferences helped to institutionalize WID both within the United Nations system and at the national level. The experiences of the Decade illustrate that in attempting to have their policy goals taken up by development agencies, WID advocates found that it was more effective if demands for social justice and equity for women were strategically linked to mainstream development concerns. In other words, arguments for equity tend to be more powerful and persuasive if they are combined with the pursuit of some overarching goal from which a large majority of people may gain.

The United Nations Decade for Women played an important part in drawing attention to the role of women in the development process. Recommendations were made for the establishment of international and national machinery to promote women's interests. During the Decade, new legislation to promote women's rights included a number of WID-related concerns, among them the right to participate in and benefit from development. One of the most comprehensive efforts was the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979), which recognized women's rights to receive training, education and extension services, as well as equal access to credit and marketing facilities, and equal treatment in agrarian reform. Although it would be folly to equate legislation (especially at the international level) with practice, the recommendations emerging from the United Nations Decade for Women provided a normative environment within which advocates could voice their demands.

The women's conferences held during the Decade also underlined the importance of changing the sexual division of labour and the need to properly value women's unpaid labour (Young 1993:131). Nonetheless, such equity issues often received only cursory treatment because of the hostility they aroused among development experts at the national and international levels. Moser suggests that demands for gender equity (that is, the reduction of inequalities between men and women in both public and private spheres) implicitly involved the redistribution of power (1993:65)—a zero sum scenario likely to meet resistance.

Buvinić also points to the threatening message of equity arguments, and suggests that development agencies did not want to “tamper with unknown and unfamiliar social variables” (1983:26). This highlights the fact that gender redistributive politics are as conflict-laden as any other redistributive issue. They are arguably more subtle in the personalized resistance they incur within bureaucracies, and complex in their confusion with cross-sex interpersonal relations (Staudt 1990). In this context, the argument that development agencies were unwilling to adopt equity arguments for fear of “cultural imperialism” is much less convincing. As Goetz astutely comments, “such reservations...do not apparently dampen the enthusiasm with which other development preoccupations—such as population control or, lately, good governance—are taken up by development institutions” (1994:29).

While bureaucratic resistance to gender redistributive policies may have necessitated efficiency-based arguments by WID advocates, the strategy has been problematic. As Goetz points out, “[d]emonstrating the efficiency dividends of investing in women” meant that WID advocates shifted the emphasis away from “women’s needs and interests in development, to calculating what development needs from women” (1994:30). In other words, women as a social group are targeted by planners as a means through which prioritized development goals can be realized, which may or may not be in the direct interest of women. The anti-poverty strategies adopted by international agencies during the 1970s<sup>10</sup> illustrate some of these problems.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, the development debate was giving recognition to the need for explicit pro-poor strategies in response to the supposed failure of the growth orthodoxy. Two overlapping anti-poverty approaches emerged. In the first, governments were urged to create or expand employment that could produce a sustained and considerable rise in real incomes for workers. The second was the “basic needs” strategy. According to its proponents, the primary aim of development was to meet basic human needs.<sup>11</sup> In this approach, the focus was placed squarely on these ends rather than on household income. A set of selective policies, it was argued, makes it possible to satisfy the basic human needs of the whole population at levels of income per capita substantially below those required by a less discriminating strategy of overall income growth (Streeten 1981:37–38). A direct effort to reduce infant mortality and educate women, for example, would reduce family size and fertility rates more speedily and at lower cost than raising household incomes. In these ways the basic needs approach “economizes on the use of resources and on the time needed to satisfy basic needs” (Streeten 1981:40).

These shifts in mainstream development thinking provided WID advocates with an opportunity to show how women could serve development. The emphasis on “poor women”, and by implication poor men, provided an opening for making the feminist agenda less threatening to male bureaucrats and programme implementers (Buvinić 1983:26). Similarly, the focus on female-headed households as the “poorest of the poor” did not raise intrahousehold redistributive questions. In general, women’s poverty was not sufficiently linked to the dynamics of male-female relations, thereby circumventing

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<sup>10</sup> The ILO’s World Employment Conference in 1976, the basic needs strategies that followed, the anti-poverty orientation in multilateral and bilateral aid, and major direct poverty reduction measures adopted by many developing countries in their national programmes were the highlights of this period (Guhan 1993).

<sup>11</sup> Besides physical needs such as food, clothing, shelter and fuel, emphasis was also placed on social needs, that is to say education, human rights and “participation” through employment and political involvement (hence, basic human needs).

the need to raise intrahousehold gender redistributive issues. Another feature of WID advocacy was that it was selective in what it adopted from the dominant development paradigm, focusing for the most part on the productive work of poor women (“productive employment”) and placing less emphasis on other items on the basic needs agenda that related to welfare issues. As we have suggested above, a major preoccupation of WID advocates has been to establish women’s issues as a serious “developmental concern”, to show that women are “producers and thus participants in the process of economic growth” (Buvinić 1983:20) and not needy beneficiaries.<sup>12</sup>

Although the emphasis on women’s productive roles to provide for their families’ basic needs increased women’s visibility on the development agenda, it was not carried through into the main policy documents of the period. The country reports of the International Labour Organization (ILO), for example, recommended quite radical land reforms in Colombia, the Philippines and Sri Lanka, and extensions of existing reforms in Iran and Kenya. In all cases, however, land reform was to take place between households rather than within them, thereby failing to take intrahousehold production relations and asset ownership into account (Palmer 1977). While in some cases granting land titles to male household heads replicated men’s pre-reform “cultivation” rights—as in Iran—in other contexts, most notably in sub-Saharan Africa, it served to undermine the usufructuary rights that women had traditionally exercised by virtue of their membership in wider kinship networks.

Instead, WID demands for “productive employment” were met by donor support for small-scale income-generating activities for women. The aim of these projects was to help poor women contribute more effectively to meeting family needs by improving their capacity to earn an income through the production of marketable goods and services. Although WID advocates highlighted the importance of helping women—in their capacity as economic providers for families—to upgrade their skills and to gain access to credit, many income-generating projects “misbehaved”. In other words, their economic objectives were subverted into welfare action for women during the process of implementation (Buvinić 1986:653). Interventions designed to strengthen women’s productive roles were often redirected to developing women’s skills in nutrition or in traditional handicrafts. Hence, these women-only projects did little to overcome poor women’s economic marginalization.

Where women figured prominently in the new pro-poor strategy, it was in an instrumental capacity. Female education and employment, for example, were highlighted as cost-effective means of solving the population problem (the latter being a major preoccupation of the basic needs strategy). Women thereby became an important “target group”. A further outcome of this approach has been a tendency to make exaggerated and unfounded claims about women’s usefulness to development. The cure for Africa’s food crisis, child welfare, environmental degradation, and the failure of structural adjustment policies are all sought in women (more recently, in gender). While this has given women a higher profile in policy discourse, the danger is that women are now expected to compensate for public provisions, which for a variety of reasons—among them stringent fiscal policies and mismanagement of resources—may not be forthcoming. As Kandiyoti (1988) and Goetz (1994) have pointed out, this can mean an

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<sup>12</sup> Much emphasis was placed on time-budget surveys. This, as Buvinić (1983) explains, is a strategy: by presenting women’s issues in a quantitative language, the communications barriers between economic theorists and practitioners would break down.

intensification of women's workloads as the onus shifts to them to extend their unpaid work as "feeders, healers, and teachers of children to include the provision of basic services to the community" (Goetz 1994:30).

### ***The impact of WID***

The impact of the early WID movement can be seen on two fronts. First, in terms of the discussions and research that it generated; and, second, in the impetus it gave to the growth of institutional machineries within development agencies and governments, their mandate being to integrate women into development. As this chapter focuses primarily on the conceptual and analytical approaches to women and development, very little attention has been given to the impact of the institutionalization of WID machineries within development agencies and governments. These issues are the subject of a number of other UNRISD publications (for example, Staudt 1994; Goetz 1995). This section addresses the first point.

By highlighting women's participation in production, researchers have provided a timely challenge both to the definition of "work" (and "active labour") and to the methods of data collection used for generating official statistics (Benería 1981). The aim has been to make visible areas of unvalorized or non-market production that tend to be disproportionately allocated to women. An important component of this endeavour has been the attempt to deal with the much-debated category of "family labour", which is also rendered culturally invisible by falling under the category of "housework" (Dixon-Mueller 1985; Sharma 1980).

Another main focus of the literature has been the evaluation of development projects designed by international development agencies to increase productivity and/or incomes.<sup>13</sup> In many cases overt discrimination against women is revealed. For example, agricultural innovation practices and extension services failed to recognize women's role in agricultural production (Staudt 1978). Male farmers received inputs and extension advice for crops that only women grew. Moreover, planners based their projects on a model of the household—the New Home Economics (NHE)—which contains a number of highly dubious assumptions.<sup>14</sup> As it has been pointed out time and again, assumptions about wives' availability to work on their husbands' farms are very often not borne out in reality.

One often-quoted case study of the implications of the failure to understand the complexity of intrahousehold relations and obligations is a rice irrigation project in the Gambia (Dey 1981). The project design assumed that men were the traditional rice growers and that they had full control over labour resources. In reality, women grew rice for household consumption and exchange within a complex system of rights and obligations between husbands and wives. Through project interventions men established exclusive rights to new land cleared for irrigation. Despite external interventions, improvements in rice production remained limited. One reason for this was that women were reluctant to perform their planned role as family labourers. Because of the particular structure of household relations in this context, husbands had to remunerate their wives with wages, presents or irrigated land in order to secure their work on the irrigated rice

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<sup>13</sup> Johnson 1988 provides a summary of such research.

<sup>14</sup> For a feminist critique of NHE, see Evans 1989.

fields. During the wet season, women had their own rice crops to cultivate and men found it difficult to recruit women's labour.

Such case studies have illustrated that women's refusal to perform the unremunerated family labour demanded of them by many development projects has been a contributing factor to the failure of such projects. They have shown as well that there is very little provision for women's independent farming in terms of allocation of land and other resources, including access to markets. The emergence of case studies like these also signalled a shift in thinking—one that took WID well beyond women-only projects and tried to integrate a concern for women into mainstream projects and programmes. It was deemed insufficient to rely on special projects for women (for example, income-generating projects), and important to ensure that women benefited from mainstream development programmes and projects as well. These points are taken up in the second part of this chapter.

It is also worth reiterating some of the anomalies thrown up in the WID literature. WID has often relied on examples drawn from sub-Saharan Africa to provide empirical evidence in support of its claims that resources directed to women will enhance economic productivity. In general, women in this region have been responsible for the family's food requirements, which has drawn them into agricultural labour—very often working in a combination of capacities. At some times they work on independent plots of land to carry out their obligations; at others, they are expected to work on compound land, to provide for the collective granary, or as casual wage labourers—a phenomenon of increasing importance. Because women's familial responsibilities include food provisioning, they are likely to have some control over how they use their own labour, albeit within a system of household rights and obligations.

By contrast, in much of the so-called belt of "classic patriarchy" (stretching from North Africa across the Middle East and the northern plains of the Indian subcontinent to Bangladesh) it is men who have the main responsibility for household food provisioning. This does not mean that women are absent from agricultural production, as the term "male" farming seems to imply. In practice what it means is that women's labour contributions to household production are often subsumed under male-controlled processes—which makes it all the more difficult to target resources to women. This general pattern, however, may be changing in many parts of the region in response to shifting socioeconomic and political circumstances.

It is also important to be aware of the extent to which policy discourse on the role of women in agricultural production in sub-Saharan Africa has been based on exaggerated claims about women's roles—what Whitehead calls "myths and counter-myths" (1990:425). From an obstinate silence about it, when the term farmer was used to mean a man, there has more recently emerged a counter-myth—that of women's pre-eminence in sub-Saharan African food production, to the extent that it is not uncommon to find claims that women produce up to 80 per cent of the region's food. This has often served to mask the importance of male labour input into farming. "Female" farming systems, however, like their "male" counterparts, are based on a complex and changing interrelation of women's and men's work. If this is the case, how easily/efficiently can resources be targeted to reach women? What impact will access to new resources have on women's productivity and women's status in the household and in the community? These are the kinds of issues women and development researchers have been addressing.

A further anomaly was WID's neglect of welfare concerns. As suggested above, a major preoccupation of WID advocates was to establish women's issues as a serious

“developmental concern”. To do so, it was deemed necessary for the “welfare approach” to give way to the “developmental approach” (Buvinić 1986). However, as Guyer and Peters (1987) note, although the reasons for making this distinction are understandable, it is a sad reflection on the state of our methods in development practice that a very real desire to recognize and serve individual women’s needs should oppose “women” to the “family” (and development to welfare, or production to reproduction). Moreover, while at the level of data collection, analysis and sectoral planning, an artificial dichotomy can be posed between production and reproduction, in the reality of women’s lives these aspects are necessarily integrated. While the increased agricultural work burden of women can serve “development” (national food security, for example), it may have unforeseen consequences for women’s own health (Vaughan 1986).

Divorcing welfare concerns from policy discourse on women may in fact generate as many problems as women’s severance from production did in an earlier generation of development projects and programmes. For historical reasons (the legacy of the “welfare” era), WID advocates distanced themselves from welfare issues. This placed them at odds with the general thrust of development discourse in the 1970s, which emphasized basic needs. As will be seen below, there were other feminist critiques of development processes emerging at the time that challenged the WID focus on women’s productive roles and argued instead for a greater recognition of the interlinkages between production and reproduction.

## Rethinking Women in Development

What is a domesticated woman? A female of the species...She only becomes a domestic, a wife, a chattel, a playboy bunny, a prostitute or a human dictaphone in certain relations. Torn from these relationships, she is no more the helpmate of man than gold in itself is money. (Rubin 1975:158)

Conflicts of interest between men and women are unlike other conflicts, such as class conflicts. A worker and a capitalist do not typically live together under the same roof—sharing concerns and experiences and acting jointly. This aspect of ‘togetherness’ gives the gender conflict some very special characteristics. (Sen 1990:147)

### **From WID to GAD**

By the late 1970s, some of those working in the field of development were questioning the adequacy of focusing on women in isolation, which seemed to be a dominant feature of the WID approach. Although an analysis of women’s subordination was at the heart of the WID approach, the essentially relational nature of their subordination had been left largely unexplored. As was noted above, WID identified women’s lack of access to resources as the key to their subordination without raising questions about the role of gender relations in restricting women’s access in the first place (and in subverting policy interventions, were they to direct resources to women). The work that was under way within various social science disciplines suggested the importance of power, conflict and gender relations in understanding women’s subordination.

Many influential writings appeared in the 1970s on the distinction between biological sex and social gender (Edholm et al. 1977; Rubin 1975). Feminist anthropology gave increasing attention to the cultural representation of the sexes—the social

construction of gender identity—and its determining influence on the relative position of men and women in society.<sup>15</sup> “Maleness” and “femaleness” were understood as the outcome of cultural ideologies, rather than of inherent qualities or physiology. The value of a symbolic analysis of gender, it was argued, lies in understanding how men and women are socially constructed, and how those constructions are powerfully reinforced by the social activities that both define and are defined by them (Moore 1988:15–16). Status and power differentials between men and women, therefore, could not be easily read off from their respective positions within the relations of production.

Starting from a similar premise—namely that gender was social/cultural in origin rather than physiological—another general tendency was to approach the problem of gender relations through an analysis of what men and women do. Adopting a sociological approach, the main concern was with gender as a social relationship; the realm of symbolic analysis—the social construction of gender identity—was not central to the theory. As the following account will show, the approaches to gender that have been adopted by the women and development advocates and scholars reviewed in this chapter have tended to be informed by this sociological tradition.<sup>16</sup> They have, for the most part, attempted to demonstrate the concrete materiality of gender subordination as it is constructed by the rules and practices of different institutions—household, market, state and community.

Of considerable influence at this juncture was the coming together of a number of feminist thinkers in 1977 to form the Subordination of Women Workshop. From that effort came the volume *Of Marriage and the Market* (Young et al. 1981), which marked a significant watershed in the evolution of thinking on feminism and development. The contributors to the volume were critical of the growing body of WID literature on several grounds—it tended to isolate women as a separate and often homogeneous category and was “predominantly descriptive” as well as “equivocal in its identification and analysis of women’s subordination” (Pearson et al. 1981:x). They also aimed to fill another lacuna, one that had emerged from applying the economic categories of traditional Marxism to the analysis of gender relations. As the introduction to the volume put it: “We wanted to develop a theory of gender which was integrated into and informed by the general analysis of the world economy”, but one that problematized the link between gender and economy in a less deterministic way (Pearson et al. 1981:x).

It is difficult to generalize about the range of approaches to women and development that have evolved during recent years. “Gender” has become the panacea of those working in the field, yet few analyses exist of the way in which “gender” is being applied as a policy-making and planning tool. In fact, as we hope to demonstrate, “gender” is being used in a number of different ways. One way to assess these approaches is to look at the “gender training” methodologies promoted by researchers and development agencies. We concentrate here on two such frameworks—“gender roles” and “social relations analysis”. By comparing these two frameworks, it is possible to draw out some of the main tensions in the way gender is being used by researchers and practitioners.

What the two approaches share is a gender-disaggregated analysis of roles and access/control over resources. Where they diverge is in the degree to which gender

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<sup>15</sup> For references and a discussion of this literature, see Moore 1988:ch.2.

<sup>16</sup> The need to distinguish between gender as a social construct and gender as social relation was raised by Ann Whitehead in an earlier draft of this chapter.



analysis is extended beyond the sphere of production to include the range of relations through which needs are met—the rights and obligations, norms and values that sustain social life. The two frameworks are also different in the degree to which they attach analytical weight to other social relations (that is, those of class, caste, etc.). And, finally, they diverge in the extent to which efficiency or equity arguments are used as the basis for revising development planning—what Kabeer refers to as “the political sub-text of training frameworks” (1992:22).

Here we also examine some recent writings by economists on gender and structural adjustment. This new theoretical approach illustrates an innovative and systematic way of thinking about gender using economic tools of analysis. The insights gained from the way gender works at the microeconomic level are in turn linked to macroeconomic policy concerns. It is argued here that, despite their far greater theoretical rigour, the underlying assumptions about gender relations in these analyses overlap to some extent with those underpinning the gender roles framework.

The second training framework under review—social relations analysis—provides a less economistic conceptualization of gender. The emphasis on women’s empowerment in the women and development literature can be seen as the action-oriented outgrowth of social relations analysis. In other words, if one were to draw out the policy implications of social relations analysis, one would have to include women’s empowerment among them.

### **The gender roles framework**

The gender roles framework was developed by researchers at the Harvard Institute of International Development in collaboration with the Women in Development Office (now the Office of Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment/GenDev) of USAID and has become a popular approach within other mainstream development institutions.<sup>17</sup> This framework derives from insights and concerns of the early WID approach, in particular the already-mentioned project appraisals.<sup>18</sup> The theoretical underpinning for the framework is provided by “sex role theory” that informs liberal feminism (Connell 1987). Many of the shortcomings that critics have identified in the gender roles framework are thus a reiteration of those directed at sex role theory.

The framework takes as its starting point that the household is not an undifferentiated grouping of people with a common production and consumption function. Households are themselves seen as systems of resource allocation (Sims Feldstein and Poats 1989:10). Gender equity is defined in terms of individual access to and control over resources; women’s (actual and potential) productive contributions provide the rationale for allocating resources to them. Gender equity and economic efficiency are thus synergistic.

What does gender analysis entail? “Gender analysis” is described as a diagnostic tool for planners to overcome inefficient resource allocation (see Overholt et al. 1985; Sims Feldstein and Poats 1989). It identifies gender-based divisions in productive and reproductive work, and gender differences in access to and control over income and resources. It then considers the implications of these divisions and differences for project design. In other words, it aims to highlight the key differences between the incentives and

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<sup>17</sup> The term “gender roles framework” is not always used but the general theoretical approach is the same.

<sup>18</sup> The gender roles framework has led to the formulation of guidelines, checklists and impact statements for integrating gender at the project level. Moser (1993:155–169) examines the variety of planning procedures to operationalize gender concerns.

constraints under which men and women work; the insights gained from this analysis are then used for tailoring planned interventions (credit, education, training, etc.) in such a way as to improve overall productivity.

One popular example of this type of approach is Cloud's analytical framework for agricultural projects (Cloud 1985). The first step involves developing an activity profile for the individuals performing different productive activities by asking an open-ended series of questions about the division of labour within the household. The second step of the framework overlaps with the first but places more focus on access to and control over resources (land, technology, labour, capital, etc.) and benefits (income, assets, etc.). In each phase, planners are encouraged to ask questions about the impact of project components on women's time availability as well as about their access to and control over productive resources and benefits. If, for example, a project places new labour demands on adult women, planners are encouraged to ask questions about how that will impact on their existing productive and reproductive activities, on their leisure time and on the responsibilities of other household members. Might daughters, for example, be withdrawn from school in order to take over their mothers' reproductive responsibilities as a result of adult women's increased agricultural work burden?

The gender roles framework thus provides important data on the distribution of roles and resources within the household. The systematic enquiry into men's and women's activities attempts to overcome the ideologies and stereotypes that render women's work invisible. Armed with such information, planners and policy makers are in a position to avoid some of the previous mistakes that resulted in project failures (as in the Gambian case cited above).

The gender roles framework puts forward gender analysis as a non-confrontational approach to planning.

Shifting discussion of farm women's roles from social to economic terms has the advantage of permitting rational discussion using commonly accepted analytic tools and arguments. It *pays* to deliver resources to women in agricultural systems. (Cloud 1985:18; emphasis in original)

Like the WID approach, the emphasis of the gender roles framework is placed squarely on economic arguments for delivering resources to women. Viewed from this perspective, the shift from WID to GAD can be interpreted as a way of disposing of both "women" and "equity"—two issues presumably most likely to meet a wall of resistance from policy makers primarily interested in "talking economics". The framework thereby translates some important components of the gender division of labour into a language that is unthreatening and accessible.

While the attempt to differentiate activities and resources along gender lines goes a long way in meeting the demand for a gender-sensitive planning methodology, the framework falls short in a number of respects. These failures, we would argue, stem from the way the gender division of labour is conceptualized.

By treating the gender division of labour primarily as a relationship of separation, the gender roles framework encourages the neglect of its "social connectedness" (Kabeer 1992:14). Although the gender division of labour involves men and women undertaking different activities, it also entails an intricate and changing system of cooperation and exchange—one that is potentially conflictual. In fact, the allocation of responsibilities for household maintenance is as important a family process as the allocation of resources. Even in the sub-Saharan African context where women and men engage in a limited degree of independent farming, women's outputs have often been seen as a source of

accumulation as well as a buffer for fluctuations in men's incomes (Guyer 1988). Moreover, while the management of responsibilities has tended to be gender-specific (for example, men pay for children's school fees while women buy foodstuffs), specialization has never been complete. The division of responsibilities tends to oscillate according to each sex's ability to cope with its own sphere, and its ability either to tap into the other or to shift the responsibilities. For example, where the revenues from men's cash crops have dropped, women have had to intensify their productive activities (for example, beer brewing, commerce) to assume many of men's traditional responsibilities. Conversely, women's enhanced earning capacity very often means that they will end up making a more significant contribution to household budgeting as men's contributions are redirected to other uses (personal consumption, productive investment, etc.). By neglecting the concrete relations between men and women, the framework fails to raise questions about how change is brought about in men's and women's roles in production and in the division of responsibilities between them. Similar criticisms have been made of sex role theory: the emphasis on role learning and socialization results in an "abstract view of the differences between the sexes, and between their situations", not a concrete account of the relations between them that can grasp social conflict and change (Connell 1987:50-54).

A further limitation of the framework's neglect of "togetherness" is that it does not pay sufficient attention to the way in which powerful gender relations can subvert resources directed at women. By refusing to ask questions about why resources are so unevenly distributed between the genders in the first place, the issue of power asymmetry is effectively brushed aside. And following from that, the assumption seems to be made that easing women's access to resources translates unproblematically into their control over how these resources are used. The problems with this assumption can be demonstrated by citing some preliminary results emerging from research on credit programmes for women.

There has been a dramatic increase over the past decade in the provision of credit to low-income landless women in rural Bangladesh, who by all accounts seem to be good credit risks. Notwithstanding the particular difficulties of monitoring loan control once credit enters the rural household, research findings suggest that the official figures mask a significant degree of male appropriation of women's loans.<sup>19</sup> Such evidence indicates the degree to which women's ability to retain control over resources allocated to them is mediated by the powerful social relations and gender ideologies that render them subordinate and not fully autonomous in the first place.

It is important, however, not to portray women as outright victims: in relinquishing control over credit, women may stand to gain indirectly. The negative consequences of male appropriation—women beneficiaries losing direct benefits and autonomy—have to be weighed against an improvement in status that women may enjoy by virtue of their newly acquired loans. Rahman, for example, found that Grameen Bank women borrowers who had transferred their entire loan to a male relative had a higher nutritional status, and had more money spent on their clothing and medical needs, than the wives of male borrowers (cited in Goetz and Sen Gupta 1994). Even if women borrowers do not experience an improvement in their status, they may still see an enhancement in their

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<sup>19</sup> Goetz and Sen Gupta (1994) find the phenomenon of male appropriation to be more significant than what had been hitherto reported for credit programmes in Bangladesh.

personal well-being by virtue of the overall improvement in household income. They may also value the welfare gains of other household members—especially their children.

The above observations nudge at a more fundamental problem, namely the difficulty of conceptualizing women's interests. The conventional economic model that assumes a unity of interest between all household members is clearly inadequate. But neither can the assumption of total separation of interests between them provide a satisfactory alternative. As Whitehead notes:

A woman's own welfare may be sufficiently linked to the success of the market production part of the household farming enterprise that she may be prepared to intensify work effort on crops for which the returns for effort are not commensurate with the amount she puts in. Or she may have interests in the welfare of other household members which lead her to acquiesce in pressure to make her work harder. (1990:457)

A similar logic can apply to women's willingness to hand over their loans to their husbands: they may relinquish control over their loans because of the presumed welfare gains for themselves and/or for their children. It is misleading, therefore, to see women's interests as entirely separate from those of other household members.

It should be clear from the above observations that women's circumscribed autonomy can be interpreted in different ways. On the one hand, it may be seen as the outcome of unequal power relations and gender ideologies that construct women as subordinate and not fully autonomous agents (implicit in Goetz and Sen Gupta's 1994 assessment of credit policies). Alternatively, it can be seen as a manifestation of the interconnectedness of the interests of women and other household members, a willingness, on the part of women, to engage in relationships that entail loss of autonomy because of the way they interpret the responsibilities of motherhood (implicit in Whitehead's 1990 critique of neoclassical decision-making models). In either case, however, the gender roles framework's assumptions of autonomy seem misplaced: the complexity of conjugal relations lies precisely in its mix of social and economic, selfishness and altruism, and conflict and cooperation. These issues are dealt with more fully in our discussion of social relations analysis.

### ***Gender and efficiency at the policy-making level***

In her most recent work, Moser (1993:69–73) sees the “efficiency approach” as the predominant policy approach to women—its purpose being to ensure that development is made more efficient and effective through women's economic contribution. What Moser is referring to here are the adjustment measures being implemented by numerous governments, under the aegis of multilateral financial institutions. Like Elson (1991), she argues that many of these policies have an inherent male bias. The arguments are by now fairly well known: that in cutting social sector expenditure and thereby shifting the costs of welfare from the state to “the household”, structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) have relied on women's ability to take on an increasing burden of unpaid work (for example, caring for the sick, looking after the young, etc.). In other words, women's unpaid labour has tended to absorb the shocks of adjustment, or as the new analogy has it, it sustains people as they “cross the desert”.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> This is how neoclassical economists have described the time needed for adjustment policies to work—that is, for the changes in relative prices to bring forth the switch in resource use.

What Moser does not mention, but what is significant in the context of our present discussion, is a related set of analyses by economists of adjustment and gender—what we have termed the “gender efficiency approach”.<sup>21</sup> The novelty of this genre of writing lies in the way it conceptualizes gender using neoclassical tools of analysis (factor market rigidities, informational biases, market distortions), juxtaposed against an appreciation of intrahousehold inequalities and bargaining. More significantly, the analysis of gender relations is systematically linked to the design of structural adjustment programmes. “Gender analysis” is thereby taken well beyond the project focus of the gender roles framework and into the realm of macroeconomic policy making.

It should come as no surprise that these authors, like many others writing in the 1980s and 1990s, have located their analyses in the context of economies undergoing structural adjustment. But instead of the usual focus on how SAPs have affected the welfare of women and children (for example, UNICEF’s *Adjustment with a Human Face*—Cornia et al. 1987), their concern is to show how gender biases and rigidities affect adjustment policies, and can ultimately frustrate them. The focus is therefore squarely placed on gender relations, that is, on the structure of relations between men and women. Such a clear and sustained focus is missing in many other attempts of this kind. The Commonwealth Secretariat (1989), for example, assessed the gender impacts of adjustment by distinguishing between the four dimensions of women’s lives: women as producers, home managers, mothers and community organizers. By looking at women’s roles in isolation, though, it failed to bring in men, and the question of male power over women (Elson 1993a:5). This is where the Palmer/Collier models provide a more promising approach. It should be noted, however, that both models are concerned with gender and adjustment in the African context.

### *Gender and adjustment: The models*

What is the nature of the argument that is being put forward? Adjustment, neoclassical economists would agree, is essentially about inducing the intersectoral flow of resources (especially labour and credit) from non-tradables to tradables in order to alter what are seen as original misallocations of resources between sectors.<sup>22</sup> If resources, however, are not mobile between sectors, raising prices of tradables is not likely to bring about the desired flow. The thrust of Palmer’s and Collier’s arguments is to show how resources (especially female labour and credit) may be allocated between sectors in a skewed and inefficient manner due to various constraints (see below). Moreover, the same constraints may reduce the mobility of resources between sectors and leave them “stuck” in the production of non-tradables.

Collier locates four distinct processes that account for why women face differential constraints upon economic activity—processes based on underlying “social conventions”. The first is discrimination outside the household—in labour markets and in credit markets. The second is that role models (in production) are gender-specific, that is, girls copy women, while boys copy men. If some new economic opportunity is initially taken up by men, therefore, it may automatically be diffused over the male population by a

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<sup>21</sup> Appleton et al. 1991; Collier 1989; Palmer 1991, 1992.

<sup>22</sup> Tradables are those commodities that can be traded in international markets—that is, export commodities and import substitutes (the latter, if protected, should lose their protection during adjustment so their prices will fall to internationally tradable levels); non-tradables are goods and services that cannot be traded internationally (for example, transport, housing).

mechanism that will not transmit it to the female population. The third is that within the household there are asymmetric rights and obligations between husband and wife, such that women have little incentive to increase their labour input. The final element is the burden of reproduction, with its attendant demands on women's health and time (Collier 1989:8).

Similar processes are identified by Palmer, even though intrahousehold markets and bargaining assume a more prominent place in her analysis, while "role copying" is largely absent. Within households, she argues, at least in the African context, there are markets—albeit rigged ones. The social aspects of gender impose their own definitions of correct exchange, which tend to reflect bargaining power and status, and this inevitably means that the terms of trade are biased against women. This can be described as an asymmetry of obligations and responsibilities between women and men (Palmer 1991:11–15).

Unlike the above-mentioned adjustment measures criticized by Moser and others, in this new approach women's unpaid work is therefore seen in economic terms. Palmer in fact takes the argument much further and regards the burden of reproduction as a tax on female labour, which women have to pay before they can join in market activities. The "reproductive tax" not only limits the time women can spend in economic activities, it also restricts them to activities that are compatible with their home schedule. This, in economic terms, amounts to gender discrimination and therefore a misallocation of women's total labour resources; and because distortions in factor markets create distortions in product markets, the reproductive tax on women "sends ripples of inefficiencies throughout the economy" (Palmer 1991:163).<sup>23</sup>

What are the implications for public policy? According to Collier (1989:10), if private sector labour and credit markets and private processes of information dissemination all make it likely that women will be less mobile than men, there is a good case that where public mechanisms exist they should have an offsetting bias. If these rigidities could be overcome through public interventions (for example, by redressing the male bias in financial markets, in education and in extension services, and retargeting payments made by public marketing channels), then women would be able to participate more fully in the production of tradables—the booming sector under SAPs. This would reduce gender inequity, as well as economic stagnation—hence the convergence between gender equity and economic efficiency. He notes, however, that so far public interventions have tended to exacerbate private biases.

Palmer, like Collier, recommends legislative and institutional reform of the public sector in the short to medium term.<sup>24</sup> But she takes the efficiency argument a step further and questions the presumed efficiency of the smallholder that underpins adjustment policy support for the "small farm" (via land titling and agricultural services). If male smallholders were to hire female labour, she asserts, their presumed superiority in efficiency terms would become questionable. According to Palmer (1991:155–157), encouraging alternative rural employment for women (in plantations, for example) can be a desirable means of freeing their labour from family production where it is used lavishly,

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<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Elson (1993) and Folbre (1994) urge a radical rethinking of efficiency to take account of costs in the "unpaid economy", placing the reproduction of human beings on centre stage. But, as will become clear, their understanding of markets is quite different from Palmer's.

<sup>24</sup> A more radical means of reducing market distortion would be through "counterbalancing distortions"; for example, making women a priority group for small and informal sector employment support services, such as information, training and credit lines; or discrimination against males in user charges for both education and health facilities (Palmer 1991:158–160).

and forcing a proper costing of labour on the family farm manager who would now have to hire labour.

Her recommendations for achieving long-term dynamic efficiency include opening up the non-biological elements of women's reproductive labour to market forces ("a calculus of costs"): "tap water and electrification of homes means a paid workforce in public utilities. Crèches mean professional, paid child-minders" (Palmer 1991:165).<sup>25</sup> This, according to Palmer, would not only reduce the amount of unpaid work women would have to do, but would also increase efficiency in the reproduction of human capital.

She warns that current adjustment policies may be worsening gender-based misallocations by shifting more of the "caring" onto women. Moreover, the rising prices of tradables will increase the asymmetry of access to resources in the farm household by giving greater incentives to the crop portfolios of men who have the power to swing increments of land, working capital and family labour in their favour (Palmer 1991:77-78). Nevertheless, despite such observations of "misguided" policies, hopes continue to be pinned on the ability of public policy to somehow "set things right" in the future.

### *Gender and adjustment: Some general remarks*

A number of observations can be made at this point. First, it is important, at least in the context of our present discussion, to be aware of the political subtext of writings on gender and adjustment. The literature being considered in this section does not constitute a monolithic discourse. There are, for example, a number of neoclassical economists for whom gender is an illustration, or a means for understanding the complexities, of a far more important process, namely adjustment.

Just as our understanding of the macroeconomics of adjustment has gained from the disaggregation of goods markets by their tradability, so our understanding of the microeconomics of adjustment can benefit from a disaggregation by gender. (Collier 1989:1)

For Palmer, however, framing gender within neoclassical discourse, above and beyond any merit it may have in enhancing the overall understanding of adjustment, has a polemical function, namely that of winning over policy makers. The point of making this distinction is to place her work within its historical context. "Gender and adjustment" then becomes the continuation of a political strategy—albeit analytically a far more sophisticated version of earlier attempts—of putting women on the agenda of policy makers by showing how they can serve development. Moreover, as a political strategy, "gender and adjustment" seems to be a timely response—one that uses the dominant neoliberal discourse to urge policy makers to take account of the economic costs of ignoring the "gender bias".

Adjustment strategies mean that demands for resources must now be supported by persuasion that there will be an economic dividend...if it can be argued that *gender issues impact on adjustment* at every turn then it might be easier to persuade policy makers to review gender issues at the earliest stage of planning, before options on overall adjustment strategies are closed off and certainly before policy packages are detailed. (Palmer 1992:70; emphasis in original)

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<sup>25</sup> The services would be paid for through an employment tax on all enterprises listed on the companies register (Palmer 1991:165).

Second, the analyses presented here share a number of key assumptions with the gender roles framework: both recognize intrahousehold gender differences in work and in access to and control over resources and income. These differences are used by both frameworks as the basis for analysing the incentives and constraints under which men and women work. Women, for example, may not contribute labour to their husbands' agricultural enterprises because they do not have access to the revenues. There is also a clear recognition in both frameworks that women's burden of reproductive work acts as a constraint on their ability to engage in productive activities. And finally, as in the gender roles framework, the insights gained from the microeconomics of gender are used for tailoring planned interventions in such a way as to improve overall economic efficiency.

The policy implications are, however, pitched at different levels: the gender roles framework tailors its interventions at the level of projects, while "gender and adjustment" links gender analysis to macroeconomic concerns. And the writings being considered in this section attempt to theorize gender using economic tools of analysis, while the gender roles framework is informed by sociological theory (sex roles). Collier, for example, uses elements of new institutional economics (imperfect information) to explain the "stickiness" in gender roles; the gender specificity of role models acts as a barrier and prevents the smooth reallocation of labour in response to price signals. Palmer (and to some extent, Collier) draws on bargaining models—another approach within institutional economics—to explain the processes of intrahousehold decision making for labour and resource allocation. The recognition of bargaining and conflict within the household, in particular, goes a long way in meeting the feminist demand for power relations to be given an explicit recognition in analyses of gender—a major shortcoming of sex role theory. These attempts at theorizing gender are discussed more fully in the following section; in the remaining part of this section we consider some of the general problems thrown up by the models.

One of the main difficulties in reading Palmer's work is that her conceptualization of markets slides around between different meanings of the term, and at certain critical points falls into what has been termed "abstract markets".<sup>26</sup> While her critique of gender discrimination within private credit markets, for example, appears to be a description of how "real" credit markets operate, some of her policy recommendations are clearly framed within the realm of "abstract" markets (that is, idealized models). Her argument in favour of large-scale commercial agriculture is a case in point.

The solution to the undervaluation of women's labour within smallholder agriculture, we are told, is to be found by encouraging female employment in the large-scale commercial sector. This, however, ignores the fact that definitions of labour (female, migrant, skilled, etc.) are built into the way markets operate. In other words, even though a female labourer does not work on a commercial estate in her capacity as "wife", her labour is nevertheless defined as "female", thereby carrying her subordinate status with her into the workplace. The literature on female employment within both the commercial agricultural sector and the industrial sector (including TNCs) provides an abundance of insights into how social norms about "femininity", "women's work" and "wifely dependence" operate within these so-called impersonal markets to create separate male and female spheres.<sup>27</sup> One of the interesting points emerging from these studies is that

<sup>26</sup> Hewitt de Alcántara 1993; Cawson 1993; Mackintosh 1990. Mackintosh (1990:47) makes a similar observation about many of World Bank's policy studies.

<sup>27</sup> Elson and Pearson 1981; Joekes 1985; Kabere 1989.



the difference in pay and work conditions is not always due to women's lower skills and/or educational levels. As Susan Joeques (1985) points out in her study of the Moroccan clothing industry, male and female machinists were performing identical tasks, but women earned 70 per cent of what men earned—even though women were regarded by management as producing better quality work and were acknowledged as having higher educational levels.

There are other problems as well with the suggestion that public support to smallholders be ceased. It is not very clear, for example, whether the relative efficiency of smallholders vis-à-vis large-scale commercial enterprises is entirely due to their access to unpaid female labour. More to the point, even if they were relatively inefficient, this may not necessarily outweigh the equity considerations (in class terms) underpinning public support for them. This raises questions about how practical a plantation policy would be for a large number of countries in Africa under present conditions: can African women activists and policy makers seriously use it in their struggles for gender equality? Moreover, women from smallholder households may not necessarily wish to exchange the direct and indirect benefits accruing to them through the "conjugal contract" for a money wage. It is also not very clear how the division of responsibilities between husband and wife would adjust to the new circumstances where women earn a money wage: would men, for example, renege on their financial responsibilities vis-à-vis children and other dependants, expecting their wives to fill in the gaps? Such questions are necessarily raised if we take gender seriously—not just as a way of structuring aspects of production, but also as a set of powerful social norms about how rights and responsibilities are to be shared.

By taking the gender efficiency argument to its logical conclusion (or extreme), Palmer, in fact, exposes its main weaknesses. In prioritizing gender over and above all other social cleavages—especially class—arguments made in favour of gender become abstract, and far removed from the competing concerns that policy makers have to attend to. Moreover, her treatment of conjugal relations ignores the cooperative aspects of marriage: in many instances women (wrongly or rightly) identify their interests with those of their households. It seems inappropriate therefore to frame policy questions on the basis of a presumed complete separation of interests between husband and wife. Some of these inadequacies stem from her conceptualization of intrahousehold relations, which is discussed in more detail below.

There are also a number of more general problems with the analyses of Collier and Palmer. The export sector is not always a booming sector, even though with liberalization and devaluation it seems to be doing much better than the food crop sector generally. The cocoa boom in Ghana and Nigeria burst a long time ago with the collapse of international prices, the problems of ageing trees, rise in input costs and environmental problems. Furthermore, an expansion in traditional exports has its own limitations from a long-term price perspective. Many researchers and agencies like UNICEF and UNCTAD believe that the fall in commodity prices in the 1980s is partly linked to the expansion in agricultural output that accompanied the introduction of the new structure of incentives. With this in view, will women's participation in the production of tradables reduce economic stagnation? It will obviously contribute to gender equity but not necessarily to economic growth.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Based on comments provided by Yusuf Bangura (personal communication, 2 November 1994).

Finally, a point that we have not raised so far—but that deserves attention—is the rather benign and simplistic view of “public policy” that is implicit in these models. Both feminist political scientists (Goetz 1992; Staudt 1978, 1990) and political economists (Harriss-White 1993; Mackintosh 1994) have been arguing for a more realistic assessment of the behaviour of public agencies. Far from being gender-neutral organizations (“rational” in the Weberian sense), public agencies and bureaucracies tend to institutionalize the power asymmetries attached to gender difference; they also tend to be poor instruments for implementing gender policies (Goetz 1992). In fact, the dissatisfaction with public policies, hierarchical bureaucracies and “top-down planning” has encouraged many gender policy advocates to rely on grassroots organizations (GROs) and NGOs to bring pressure on planners and policy makers and to increase public accountability to women. Some of these issues are addressed at the end of the chapter.

### ***Gender and adjustment: Conceptualizing gender***

There are also a number of problems with the way gender is conceptualized in these models.<sup>29</sup> According to Lockwood (1992), Collier in fact fails to explain the constraints on mobility and labour allocation that are central to his model. By attributing these constraints to “social convention”, the explanation for gender identity is effectively placed outside the model—either seen as part of the natural world or somehow beyond explanation. This mystification, however, goes against the thrust of recent feminist scholarship, which documents the historical construction and accentuation of gender identity in Africa. The contemporary gender divisions in African agriculture, far from being “natural” or the result of a mysterious “social convention”, are in fact the outcome of a “definitely economic history” (Lockwood 1992). Processes of economic change or commoditization, initiated at the onset of colonial rule and intensified during periods of higher commodity prices in the 1920s and 1950s, played a significant part in accentuating gender differences in control over land and labour, in intensifying the demands placed on domestic production, and also in changing the meaning of domestic production, making it not only gender-specific but also less valued.

The critique, however, is not merely of historical relevance. Similar processes appear to be under way on the continent as a result of current adjustment policies. The rising prices of tradables seem to be worsening the relative gender imbalance in control exercised over agricultural technology, information and family labour. Palmer, in fact, warns that “[a]djustment, by giving price incentives to tradables, essentially exercises the same forces as the colonial promotion of cash crops” (1991:178). At the same time, the cuts in social expenditure (to increase efficiency) and the transfer of costs onto women are intensifying the burden of domestic work. In the same way that the feminization of domestic production underwrote cheap labour in the tradable sector during the colonial and post-colonial period, the shifting of costs onto women appears to be absorbing some of the shocks of current adjustment policies. In sum, economic processes associated with structural adjustment (commoditization, cuts in social expenditure) seem to be accentuating the very gender biases and rigidities that Collier (1989) and Palmer identify as “problems” for adjustment.

Collier’s model seems to offer little insight into the way gender relations in Africa have changed and continue to change in the context of economic restructuring. The

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<sup>29</sup> The following paragraphs draw heavily on Lockwood’s (1992) critique of Collier.

characterization of gender roles as “natural” misses the important point that gender roles in Africa are the outcome of economic forces very similar to those unleashed by current structural adjustment policies. Although Palmer admits that women in Africa are currently absorbing the “shocks of adjustment” (as they did during the colonial and post-colonial period), this observation is not built systematically into her model—in other words, market integration and commercialization do not figure among the processes identified by her to account for gender inequality.

Moreover, she argues that what might be seen as higher efficiency (for example, cuts in social expenditure) is in fact a shift of costs from the paid to the unpaid economy. Hence, the benefits of gender roles for adjustment are apparent rather than real. She would therefore go along with Collier, arguing that gender roles are “suboptimal” and that it is imperative that public policy intervene to counter the influence of “social convention”.

If the processes unleashed by economic restructuring are not considered to be responsible for the creation and accentuation of gender inequality, how then is the reproduction of gender inequality explained? As in other models of imperfect information, the main sources of change in Collier’s model are external: changes in relative prices, and in the relative costs and benefits of information and transactions (Lockwood 1992). Reducing the reproduction of gender inequality to information costs, however, may appear to many to be unduly reductionist. Does Palmer’s analytical framework, which relies more heavily on notions of intrahousehold bargaining and exchange (and less on information and transaction costs), offer a more satisfactory alternative?

Palmer considers intrahousehold allocations of resources to be essentially the same as market exchanges, for they involve two people with “different interests” bargaining and exchanging resources—“the basic attributes of markets” (1991:14). Conjugal conflict over the labour process, then, can be equated with employer-employee bargaining. The availability of employment opportunities for women in large-scale agricultural enterprises, for example, will enforce a “proper costing” of women’s labour, freeing them from their family obligations where their labour is used lavishly.

Such analogies, however, seem misleading for the way they ignore the workings of gender ideologies, and the special features of “togetherness” that characterize conjugal relations. The framing of intrahousehold relations in terms of bargaining and exchange helps capture the coexistence of extensive conflicts and pervasive cooperation in household arrangements. But it neglects the influence of a number of other factors. In his discussion of bargaining models, Sen (1990) grapples with these issues by highlighting the influence of perceived interests and perceived contributions on husband-wife bargaining.

A recurrent theme in the literature on intrahousehold relations is women’s tendency to identify with the interests of other household members—especially their children. Such altruistic behaviour (“maternal altruism”), as we have already noted, has been interpreted in various ways. Some see it as a manifestation of “false consciousness” or “illusion”, assuming that there exist objective guides to real interests (such as human development indices or Amartya Sen’s functionings and capabilities). According to this interpretation, the underdog comes to rationalize his or her own position as something voluntary, thereby accepting the legitimacy of the unequal order. Others, however, have questioned liberal notions of individual autonomy, seeing “maternal altruism” as part of the moral world in which individuals operate.

In either case, the assumption of clear and unambiguous perceptions of individual interest seems to miss the ideological/moral factors that condition behaviour in significant ways. Even if one assumes that interests can be objectively defined, perceptions

of interest are important “not because they are definitive guides to individual interests and well-being...but because the perceptions (including illusions) have an influence—often a major impact—on actual states and outcomes” (Sen 1990:128). These points are discussed at greater length in the following section on social relations analysis.

### *Gender and efficiency: Concluding remarks*

The models discussed above constitute an innovative departure in the literature on women and development. They provide a systematic way of thinking about gender using economic tools of analysis, as well as a way of assessing the impact of gender differences on macroeconomic concerns. Gender is thus made relevant to policy making with arguments for economic efficiency (rather than equity). Gender policy advocates may find that efficiency arguments can be a particularly potent political strategy for the way they turn the dominant neoliberal discourse into an advocacy tool and promote communication with economists and economic policy makers.

What the above critique has suggested is that in using economic models (imperfect information, bargaining, market exchange) some important aspects of gender relations have been lost. A number of points were raised in this section, some of the more important being the models’ neglect of historical and contemporary evidence on the impact of market integration and commercialization on gender inequality, the neglect of ideological/moral factors that have a major impact on gender relations, and the neglect of other social cleavages (especially class). There are also political implications following from these observations. Gender advocates may find the framing of “gender and adjustment” a case of “misguided policies” (that is, policy makers working with the wrong conceptual guides), and the excessive reliance on top-down planning to “set things right” to be negligent of the fact that policy-making institutions are themselves “gendered” and that they often respond to pressures of a political nature.

However, given the enormous rhetorical appeal of the concept of efficiency, and the importance of maintaining communication with those in the policy formulation process, instead of abandoning the discourse of efficiency altogether because of its excessively narrow neoclassical focus, one can turn to the work of feminist economists who have broadened the scope of economics and of economic efficiency to include sustainable human development among its objectives. A feminist critique of economic policy reform at the macrolevel questions how economic policy treats the interdependence between the “productive economy” and the “reproductive economy”, between making a profit and meeting needs, between covering costs and sustaining human beings (Elson 1993b:14). Macroeconomics is criticized for its male bias, for its one-sided view of the macro economy: for only considering the monetary aggregates of “productive economy” and ignoring the human resource aggregates of the “reproductive economy” (Elson 1993b:16). A suggested way forward is to campaign in order that all programmes for macroeconomic policy reform include not only targets for monetary aggregates but also targets for human development aggregates (Elson 1993b:16).

As noted above, feminist economists like Diane Elson are also less optimistic than neoclassical economists about the ability of markets to provide both an efficient use of resources and gender equity. Markets, Elson argues, are not abstract cash nexuses; they are “inevitably social institutions in which buying and selling is structured asymmetrically to the advantage of some participants rather than others”, social norms are intrinsically built into them, and they mean insecurity and risk as well as opportunity (Elson 1993a:22). Hence, there is a need to restructure market relationships through political

action: contesting current social norms about gender; fostering the creation of new market institutions organized around new, more equal, gender norms; and enhancing women's bargaining power through women's networks and collective organizations.

### **Social relations analysis**

This section examines social relations analysis, another training approach through which gender is operationalized.<sup>30</sup> Gender relations refer specifically to those dimensions of social relations that create differences in the positioning of men and women in social processes. It is through gender relations that men are given a greater capacity than women to mobilize a variety of cultural roles and material resources in pursuit of their own interests. The central problematic within this approach is not women's integration into development per se but the social structures, processes and relations that give rise to women's disadvantaged position in a given society. As such, ending women's subordination is viewed as more than a matter of reallocating economic resources. It involves redistributing power. The assumption being made here is that it may be difficult to reallocate economic resources equitably without changes in social relations. Rather than downplaying the "political" dimension of gender, social relations analysis brings it to the core of its analysis.

As a method of operationalizing gender, social relations analysis demands a significant understanding of gender relations, as there are no "quick fixes" for overcoming gender inequality.<sup>31</sup> Social relations analysis does not take as its starting point efficiency arguments about women's contribution to development. Instead, development agencies are urged to take a more gender-aware approach to development on the grounds that it will help to "improve development policy and practice" (IDS n.d.). This does not mean that those adopting social relations analysis are uninterested in having resources allocated to women or in raising women's productivity levels; however, they do not make the assumption that raising women's productivity is simply a matter of reallocating resources, nor will reallocating resources to women necessarily lead to women's equality or autonomy. More importantly, proponents of social relations analysis recognize that the redistributive process is a zero sum game (Kabeer 1994:97). Although it is hoped that all will win in the long run, in the short and even the medium term men will have to relinquish some of their economic, political and social power.

Social relations analysis begins from the premise that development planning needs to take account of both the relations of production and the interrelated range of relations through which needs are met, "the social relations of everyday life" (Pearson et al. 1981:x). This ensemble of relations governs the processes of production and reproduction, distribution and consumption. Consequently, all planning, either at the macro or micro level, has to be informed by some understanding of the broad set of social relations through which production is organized and needs are met.

Given the holistic approach taken by social relations analysis, other forms of social differentiation also need to be taken into consideration—including class, ethnicity, age,

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<sup>30</sup> Social relations analysis is often associated with researchers working in connection with the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex. Our discussion of social relations analysis, as a training framework, draws heavily on the work of Naila Kabeer, Ann Whitehead and Kate Young. But social relations analysis as a general analytical approach underpins a much wider body of literature on gender issues.

<sup>31</sup> Kabeer (1994) outlines an analytical framework for using a social relations perspective in development policy and planning.

caste, etc. “Gender, class, race and other divisions cross-cut one another. And this means that any group of women will have something in common—but will differ in other ways” (IDS n.d.).

The important point for planners and policy makers here is the need to take into account both the similarities and differences among women. It also implies that for any given context it is necessary to assess the importance of a range of factors; in some cases, gender may not be the key factor of analysis (see Goetz 1989). The framework also draws attention to social relations embedded in the range of institutions through which social groups acquire resources: the household, the community, the market and the state (Kabeer 1994). Thus, social relations analysis takes us beyond the focus of the gender roles framework on the household.

One of the main differences between the gender roles framework and social relations analysis is the way in which the division of labour between men and women is conceptualized. As illustrated above, from the perspective of the gender roles framework, the gender division of labour is essentially a form of social separation. In contrast, from a social relations analysis perspective the gender division of labour is understood as a form of “social connection”. In assigning women and men to different responsibilities, activities and spheres, the gender division of labour also makes it essential for them to engage in relationships of cooperation and exchange.<sup>32</sup> As Kabeer has pointed out, however, this interdependence is not symmetrical. The unequal division of resources and responsibilities means that gender relations involve conflict as well as cooperation (1992:19).

This conceptualization of the division of labour has two important implications for planners and policy makers. First, it suggests that even if women can exercise control over particular products or stages of production, they will not necessarily gain real autonomy or equality unless the overall terms of exchange and cooperation are also shifted in their favour. In her work on household resource management, for example, Young suggests that there is no direct relationship between women’s ability to earn an independent income and their power in household decision making. Other factors have been shown to affect this relationship, including length of marriage, age and number of children, ownership of other resources, and possession of social resources (for example, prestige of occupation, natal family’s social position and social network) (Young n.d.:18–19). Social relations analysis brings into focus the range of factors that determines a woman’s power. Its findings challenge the assumption that improving women’s economic status will always lead to a positive change in their overall decision-making power or, say, in the disposition of joint income.

Second, the conceptualization of the division of labour as “social connection” suggests that interventions in the form of new resources to either men or women will upset pre-existing systems of exchange, sometimes with negative consequences. Goetz’s (1989) review of a UNDP/UNIFEM fish-smoking project in Guinea provides one example of this.

Using an approach very close to that described above as the gender roles framework, the project identified the different activities undertaken by women and men in a fishing community. The aim was to introduce labour-saving technology into the stages of production in which women were concentrated, with a view to increasing their productivity. In this community it was primarily men who caught the fish, which were

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<sup>32</sup> Young 1993:140; Kabeer 1992:14; Whitehead n.d.

then smoked and marketed by women. The project organized women's collectives and gave them new fish-smoking ovens.

The project did not succeed in improving returns to women's labour despite its analysis of gender roles. According to Goetz, the project's failure can be attributed to its treatment of women's activities in isolation from the social relations of production in fishing (1989:6). There was an implicit assumption that project intervention at one stage of the production process would have no impact on other stages.

Over time, the women of the community had established bargaining relationships with the fishermen (in some cases their husbands) whereby men were assured regular outlets for processing and marketing their fish while women depended on men for the supply of fish. The project, by introducing new technology to women, disrupted this system of interdependencies without offering alternatives to the traditional methods of supply. Perceiving women as beneficiaries of outside funds, the men increased the price of their fish beyond what the project groups could afford. Alternative fish supplies had to be purchased at unprofitably high prices and added to labour inputs of the activity. As Goetz concludes, focusing on the gender division of tasks in the production process without considering their interdependencies undermined a functioning system without providing an alternative that might have enhanced women's control over their productive activities.

A critical concern of social relations analysis, therefore, is the precise terms under which men and women cooperate and the specific institutions (marriage, the household, the community, the market, the state, etc.) through which such cooperation is structured.<sup>33</sup> As the above example indicates, social relations embedded in institutions are central to the analysis of one of the key WID concerns—women's productivity. This can also be seen in the way in which social relations analysis evaluates women's economic incentives and disincentives.

One central argument made by those using social relations analysis is that a neoclassical decision-making framework is not sufficient for understanding the matrix of social relations through which production, distribution and consumption are carried out. Instead, social relations analysis gives primacy to the "moral economy" (Kabeer 1992:11). Because conventional economic planning considers primarily individualized production and material resources, it undervalues more fluid social or relational resources such as rights, obligations and claims. As Scott (cited in Kabeer 1992:12) points out, the "moral economy" often involves relationships that entail loss of status and autonomy in exchange for some measure of security. For women, the gender relations of family and kinship frequently embody a trade-off between security and autonomy.

Whitehead's research on women's family labour intensity in sub-Saharan Africa referred to above provides some insight into the economic trade-offs women are likely to make. According to Whitehead, "what determines wives' work intensity is a complex of factors associated with other kinds of investment in the social relations under which the work is being performed". These factors include "the social relations of the family, including the way in which women, and men, as part of a particular culture and society, interpret the responsibilities of motherhood" (Whitehead 1990:457). In order to understand women's economic decision making, it is necessary to determine how women perceive their interests and to consider how these relate to their position within the

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<sup>33</sup> One such institution is marriage, the socially elaborated terms of exchange and cooperation of which are embodied in what Whitehead (1981) calls the "conjugal contract".

family and the household. In this connection, as was noted above, Whitehead attempts to fill the gap that has emerged between models that treat the household as a unit wherein members share common goals and interests, and other models that imply a total separation of interests between women and men within the household. Although she warns that “it is unhelpful to treat a wife as wholly submerged in the household”, she challenges the view that the economic separation between husbands and wives is total (Whitehead 1990).

The important point for development planning arising from the discussion above is that women’s perceptions of their economic interests must be accepted as valid and taken into consideration in the planning process. What social relations analysis aims to provide is a sensitive reading of the intricate social relations through which women and men live their lives, the findings of which can aid development planners to tailor interventions more appropriately. Where resources are directed to women, for example, an effort must be made to consider whether, in subverting existing gender relations, targeted interventions will ultimately enhance women’s status or, by undermining certain familial or community rights to which they were traditionally entitled, place them in a more vulnerable position.

In view of the importance that social relations analysis attributes to power relations, further attention needs to be given to the process through which more equitable power-sharing between the genders is to be achieved. There is consensus among proponents of social relations analysis that redistributing resources between the genders will involve conflict, losses for some and gains for others. If this is the case, how will men be convinced to renegotiate power relations, given the pervasiveness of the gender system so well documented by the social relations analysis? Although this theme is not fully developed in the literature, perhaps one way of overcoming this dilemma is to focus on the dynamic nature of social relations. Social relations are not static. As social relations analysis attempts to demonstrate, the conflictual and collaborative aspects of gender relations involve men and women in a constant process of negotiation and renegotiation. The priority for those interested in improving women’s status, therefore, must be to provide women with greater bargaining power within this process.

In this context, whereas the gender roles framework and the “gender efficiency approach” highlight the importance of directing economic resources to women, the centrality of the power dimension of gender relations has led some advocates of social relations analysis to highlight the need for action-oriented political strategies to bring about women’s “empowerment” (Kabeer 1992; Young 1993). This marks an important shift in terrain from the technical concerns of policy makers and planners to the political arena per se. Kabeer hints at the logic behind this shift:

Because there are risks and costs incurred in any process of change, such change must be believed in, initiated, and directed by those whose interests it is meant to serve. Empowerment cannot be given, it must be self-generated. All that a gender-transformative policy can hope to do is to provide women with the enabling resources which will allow them to take greater control of their own lives, to determine what kinds of gender relations they would want to live within, and to devise the strategies and alliances to help them get there. (Kabeer 1994:97)

The policy implications of social relations analysis, therefore, involve the political project of women’s self-empowerment. In contrast to the top-down planning approach of the “gender efficiency” and gender roles frameworks, emphasis is placed on women’s



NGOs and “participatory” planning (Kabeer 1992:36). Below we consider some of the implications of this shift to the arena of politics.

### ***Empowerment, NGOs and collective action***

NGOs have long been active in the development field and have gained increasing prominence in recent years. Women’s NGOs have been no exception to this general rule. Throughout the 1980s, as the efficacy of central planning came under question and as the ideological discrediting of “the state” gained momentum, NGOs were embraced by donor governments and multilateral funding agencies as partners in development. This shift in thinking was also reflected in the growing proportion of development funding handled by the NGO sector. In Africa, for instance, about half of World Bank development funds for 1993 were channelled through NGOs (UNRISD 1994). At the same time, there has been a significant change in the development agenda away from a preoccupation with economic issues toward an emphasis on political and institutional problems. Human rights, good governance and participation have thus gained prominence.

For gender policy advocates, the emphasis on NGOs has entailed a number of contradictory implications. On the one hand, the early and current critique of the project approach by some of these advocates and the efforts at mainstreaming gender at the macroeconomic level seem to be at odds with the NGO approach to development, which is essentially project-oriented and often “anti-state”. On the other hand, the rhetoric of “empowerment” and “bottom-up development” has much appeal, for reasons that are explained below. In fact, as was noted in the previous section, women and development advocates differ in the extent to which they see a role for NGOs and collective action—in part a reflection of their underlying assumptions about the nature of women’s subordination. Those using social relations analysis, for example, tend to see a more critical need for empowerment strategies at the grassroots level, while gender efficiency advocates rely more heavily on changing the conceptual frameworks used by planners and policy makers.

It is unfortunate that the shortcomings of the project approach to development have not received sufficient attention within the women and development literature. The “welfare approach” came to signify all that was wanting in early development practice vis-à-vis women. The term “welfare” in this context became shorthand for a number of overlapping lacunae: first, an undue emphasis on women’s reproductive roles (and the neglect of their productive work); second, a view of women as passive beneficiaries (as opposed to active agents); third, and most importantly, the relegation of women’s issues to marginalized and underfunded projects (rather than their incorporation into mainstream development programmes and policies).

One outcome of this lack of conceptual clarity has been that most of the blame for failure was placed at the door of “welfare” (in fact welfare became a synonym for failure), when it should have been more clearly directed at the project approach per se—regardless of whether its objectives were welfare or production oriented. Localized impact (even where successful) rather than broad coverage, efficiency losses due to the tendency for duplication and lack of coordination, difficulty in reaching certain groups of people (very often the more disadvantaged) and inability to control the negative fallouts of other general policies—these are some of the main limitations of the project approach that the development literature has highlighted.

On the other hand, what seems to have fuelled the recent enthusiasm for NGOs within women and development circles relates, at least in part, to their encounters with

the world of public institutions. The 20-year experience of women and development advocates trying to engender public institutions and their policies (through women's bureaux, WID focal points and gender training) has been a frustrating, and very often disappointing, one. It is not surprising therefore to find the NGO rhetoric of "bottom-up development" being taken up not only by the institutional outsiders (that is, activists and academics) but also by advocates working within mainstream development institutions.

Caroline Moser, an influential gender planner, is one insider to concede that "[c]hange instigated through 'top-down' interventions of the state as the dominant 'structure' of power, control and domination is distinct from change achieved through bottom-up mobilization of 'agency' in civil society". Since the success of gender planning depends on the participation of women, "it is the organization of women within civil society that requires examination". She then goes on to describe how NGOs can make planning an "emancipatory process": "[b]ecause of their capacity to reach the 'grass-roots' where 'real people' are...NGOs have increasingly been identified as the institutional solution for 'alternative' development models" (1993:191).

Similarly, Kate Young sees NGOs as a channel through which planners can be kept informed of women's needs and priorities so that women's views constitute essential inputs into the revision of projects and plans. In this way, NGOs can fill a missing link in efforts to integrate gender into development planning. "Government works best when it is responsive to and accountable to the bulk of the population"; NGOs can play an important part in "promoting the interests of the citizenry" (Young 1993:162). The common assumption here seems to be that policy makers are most responsive to pressures of a political nature and that to be able to exert such pressure women need to get themselves organized. NGOs are thus entrusted with the task of reaching the least privileged and the poorest women, helping them strengthen their existing organizational capacities, or facilitating group formation (since the poorest often have the least structural capacity for organization).

Women's power is thus premised on a collective notion of empowerment, targeting in particular the poorest and the least privileged groups. The collective empowerment of poor women means enabling them "to take control of their own lives to set their own agendas, to organize to help each other and make demands on the state for support and on society itself for change" (Young 1993:158). Young, in fact, is among the few advocates of empowerment who are clear about the competitive nature of power. Critical of the neoliberal thinking that people empower themselves "by pulling themselves up by their bootstraps", she emphasizes the conflictual nature of power: "empowerment is not just about women acquiring something, but about those holding power relinquishing it" (Young 1993:158).

Young, like many other advocates, recognizes the importance of more practical NGO initiatives as a means of politicizing women's issues. It is frequently argued that when women get organized, either spontaneously or through the mediation of an NGO, to demand and/or arrange for the provision of their basic needs (for example, water, sanitation or a cash income), this can initiate an "emancipatory process". In the process of engaging in welfare-oriented schemes, a space is created for "consciousness raising" and organizational capacity building. Women thereby become active agents in questioning their social position and organizing to bring an end to discriminatory practices.

As an example of how meeting a practical need (for cash) can have a transformational potential or serve a strategic interest, Young (1993:156) cites the example of producer cooperatives.<sup>34</sup> Forming a locally based production group can provide the conditions for an empowering experience if space is provided for discussion and exchange of experiences, and an examination of the roots of women's poverty and powerlessness. This model is regarded as superior to both piece-rate and factory work, since the former tends to reinforce women's isolation and in the latter men tend to occupy positions of power and authority.

Similarly, in DAWN's (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era) classification of women's organizations, among the most promising are grassroots organizations that originate from the economic and material conditions women experience. They very often focus on meeting women's practical needs, relating not only to income but also to health and education. Through this they raise consciousness and engage in advocacy, legal struggles and political action (Sen and Grown 1988:92). Like Kate Young, the DAWN network also recognizes the importance of women's movements that have come together around basic needs such as fuel and water, and in response to urban crises such as loss of services or inflation (for example, the Latin American shantytown women's organizations).

Thus there are two main themes emerging from the literature on women's empowerment that deserve closer scrutiny: first, the role of NGOs in facilitating bottom-up development; and, second, the notion of collective action.

#### *Bottom-up development and NGO strategies*

The women and development empowerment literature argues that a stronger and more diverse civil society will lead to a more representative and accountable government, which will be more likely to implement equitable development policies. As a general vision of how society should be organized, few people would refute the desirability of having accountable and transparent policy-making institutions and bureaucracies, and strong organizations that can represent and empower the poor. But, in order to turn that vision into reality, what should be the intermediate strategies of NGOs? The convergence of strategic and practical issues within the women and development empowerment literature provides some insights.

Since it is difficult to engineer social movements, the intermediate strategy is to use NGOs as catalysts to bring together those most deeply affected by change, help them understand/articulate their situation, and assist them in building their organizational capacities. However, given the difficulties in carrying out consciousness-raising and organizational capacity building in a vacuum, some advocates have come to appreciate the practical issues around which women can be brought together. Most of these practical initiatives are essentially projects with welfare (health, education, sanitation) or production (microenterprise) objectives. How are these initiatives going to be different from the much-despised women's income-generating projects that littered many developing countries during the Women's Decade?

Even though there is no explicit discussion of this question, it is clear from the literature that the main difference lies in NGOs' "organizational capacities" and their

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<sup>34</sup> The practical/strategic distinction was first introduced by Molyneux (1985) and is used widely in women and development planning and policy circles.

“visions and perspectives” (Sen and Grown 1988:89). This will presumably take them beyond the project approach and enable them to provide the “missing link” in efforts to integrate gender into development planning (that is, make planning participatory or bottom-up). It is also important to note here that these gender policy advocates do not premise their arguments for NGO involvement in development (for example, welfare provisioning, service delivery or productive employment) on a neoliberal critique of the state. Where they do see a role for NGOs is in an advocacy capacity—in “creating space” for women to help them articulate their demands and bring pressure on the state; in other words, to make the policy-making process more responsive to the needs of women.

For women’s organizations to play a key role in participatory planning, they must, however, meet a number of conditions. First, the organizations that are concerned with working with the poor and delivering services or other benefits to them are urged to “look very stringently at their own mechanisms of participation, democratic decision-making and accountability” (Young 1993:164; Sen and Grown 1988:89). Second, women’s organizations are advised to seek financial resources, training (management, leadership formation or conflict resolution) and access to information. Third, they must play a role in the wider social movements by building alliances, thereby avoiding isolation and marginalization.

The problem with these recommendations is their level of generality. Individuals struggling within organizations to set their own understanding of what women’s “true interests” are on the organization are not likely to change their strategies simply by a recommendation that they strive for democratic decision making. The difficulties in developing guidelines that are any more specific are due in large part to the wide range of circumstances in which local organizations operate (Vivian 1993). In fact, Sen and Grown are quite clear: they claim neither that they have “all the answers to the problems, nor that there are unique solutions to them”. The solutions, they assert, “have to be worked out at the local level by the groups themselves” (Sen and Grown 1988:95).

Although some NGOs have created more “space” for women’s voices to be heard—either by using participatory methodologies in the process of needs identification or by operating with an open rather than a closed agenda—this seems to be the exception rather than the rule. A survey of women in producer cooperatives in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal provides some illustration of what the potential pitfalls can be (Mayoux 1995).<sup>35</sup>

Influenced by Gandhian ideology, the cooperative model has had a long history of official promotion in India as part of small-scale industrial policy. Numerous cooperatives have also been set up by “radical” NGOs and women’s organizations as part of an explicit strategy of “empowerment”. The interesting point emerging from this survey is not so much that success was rare, but rather the wide gap between the rigid cooperative model that was being imposed by the implementing/funding agencies (state and NGO alike) and the needs and priorities of many of the intended beneficiaries.

The stated goal of these agencies was that women should work together in a cooperative workshed and market products collectively with some form of participatory decision-making structure. But the cost in terms of time spent in decision making was in fact a major disincentive for many women, particularly the poorer ones who would have preferred to spend that time earning a wage. Moreover, the requirement that

<sup>35</sup> The survey is based on the author’s in-depth field research from 1984 to 1987 in West Bengal and from 1989 to 1991 in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.

production should take place in a cooperative workshed, which was meant to break down the strictures of purdah and build support networks between women, proved to be a disincentive for many of the younger women who had young children at home. Many men and women stated a preference for working at home, both because of the greater flexibility to combine production with other tasks and also because of the difficulties in making houses secure against theft when all family members were absent. Moreover, working outside the home did not bring forth the intended sharing of domestic work; in fact, it imposed extra costs on the women workers (in terms of time and money spent on transport).

It is not clear whether projects implemented by NGOs are any more successful than those being run by public institutions, at least on the basis of purely economic criteria (that is, levels of income earned, regularity of employment and economic survival). As for the non-quantifiable criteria of success emphasized by gender policy advocates, although NGOs have shown themselves to be flexible and innovative in some contexts, pressures to justify donor funding seem to have led to an expansion of standardized and ill-thought out projects, which link NGOs to some of the same problems associated with state interventions—inefficiency, bureaucratic rigidity and lack of sensitivity to local peculiarities and the needs of beneficiaries (UNRISD 1994). A recent UNRISD study on NGO activities in Zimbabwe confirms many of these shortcomings (Vivian and Maseko 1994). Moreover, as NGOs take on more of the activities and responsibilities that states have hitherto assumed, they are likely to become even more susceptible to these pitfalls.

### *Collective action*

The process of bottom-up development promoted by some women and development advocates hinges on collective action. In this context, NGOs are seen as playing a central role in organizing women for collective action. It was indicated above that unrealistic expectations are being placed on the capacity of NGOs to engage in bottom-up development. Are similar assumptions being made about NGOs and collective action? One way to approach this question is by looking at NGOs as institutions. Feminist scholarship has made a significant contribution to the understanding of institutions—the critique of conventional models of the household, and the more recent literature on state bureaucracies and national and international agencies being among the more significant.<sup>36</sup>

Are the same analytical tools useful for understanding women's organizations and feminist collective action? It is our contention that the application of an analysis of social relations is useful and that it involves: first, the disaggregation of the category of "women"; second, seeing women and men bound up in a web of conflictual and cooperative relationships; and, third, an understanding of gender "interests" as socially and historically constructed, and continually reformulated. There is an obvious tension between a "gendered" analysis along the lines suggested and some strands of populist feminist thinking that are dominant in the collective action literature.

First, the category of "women" is problematic, in the sense that it needs to be disaggregated: in addition to class, women are also divided by age and lifecycle—not to mention nationality, race, ethnicity, religion and sexual preference. The discussion of

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<sup>36</sup> On the former see in particular Folbre 1986; Evans 1989; and Kabeer 1991; on the latter see Goetz 1992; Kandiyoti 1991; Mohanty et al. 1991; and various contributions in Staudt 1990.

multiple identities evidently leads to the vexed notion of interests. Because women are positioned within society according to a variety of different criteria, the interests they have in common as a group are similarly shaped in complex and sometimes conflicting ways; it is therefore difficult, if not impossible, to generalize about the interests of women (Molyneux 1985). Although it would be a fair generalization to say that all women experience subordination, the fact that subordination has multiple causes and is extremely variable across time and space means that it is not sufficient as the single criteria for explaining collective action.

Second, most women are members of households and perceive (wrongly or rightly) their interests to be bound up with those of other household members (especially their children). As noted in the discussion of social relations analysis, what determines women's contributions of labour to their husbands' plots, for example, is a complex of factors—not just benefits to themselves, but also the well-being of other household members, and the fulfilment of certain moral commitments that they perceive as important.

In some writings on women's organizations, the issue of heterogeneity is taken as the starting point. Young (1993) and Moser (1993), for example, both note that different forms of social stratification cut across each other and interact in complex ways, rendering the category of "women" a highly heterogeneous one (Young 1993:150). They are far less willing, however, to see women's moral behaviour toward others (especially their children) and their loyalty to their families and households as "conscious" decisions on their part. Young, for example, argues that "[w]hile women are clearly active in trying to cope with the situation they find themselves in, it cannot be assumed that they have perfect knowledge or understanding of the economic, political and social context of their lives" (Young 1993:143).

Women as individuals may well be aware of their subordinate position and powerlessness, but the force of ideology may render this 'natural' or 'God given'. Equally, even when it is recognized as social, the structural roots of discrimination and inequality are not always easily identified (Young 1993:143).

From this perspective, the situation of women cannot be improved simply by "asking women themselves" what their interests are. The implication is that NGOs can create space in which individual women can begin "to break away from the highly circumscribed sphere of family, kin or village" and "to understand the role of ideology" in constructing their understanding of their experiences (Young 1993:142). There is little recognition, however, that gender relations of family and kinship may entail some measure of security for women, for which they may be willing to give up individual autonomy and personal status. Within traditional familial and kinship relations, such as those of marriage, women are entitled to certain rights; they may therefore resist attempts at subverting these relations if a viable alternative is not made available to them. The recognition that women—even poor women—have divided group loyalties and multiple identities and interests would help explain why they have not rallied around a common agenda to the extent that some activists would have liked to see.

Similar assumptions are implicit in some analyses of women's organizations. The issue of conflict, for example, is at times brushed aside, as women's groups are urged to become democratic. There seems to be little recognition that organizational politics and struggle are as likely in women-only organizations as in mixed-gender ones. In the same way that women take their gender identities with them into "impersonal" markets, they

also take their other identities with them into women's organizations—making both conflict and hierarchy inevitable.<sup>37</sup>

By using “women” as a homogeneous category (like “the community” or “the peasants” in populist development discourse) and in searching for “the feminine” essence (non-hierarchical, conflict-free, etc.) as a guiding principle, much of the thinking on women's NGOs falls into a trap of denying the historical and cultural construction of gender. In other words, if difference and conflict among women are denied because of some underlying notion of common “real interests”, the “problems” with feminist collective action will have to be explained by recourse to false consciousness. This, however, is a highly problematic start.

The recognition that the category of “women” is a very heterogeneous one does not mean that common interests cannot be found. In many societies women use kinship and non-kinship links to cooperate across households—farming each others' fields in rotation, helping with childcare, pooling their savings to cover for major lifecycle events (such as marriage) or for productive investments (Harris 1981; Moore 1988:155–170). Many of these groups or arrangements are informal and have evolved as coping mechanisms through which women try to escape some of the constraints of their economic circumstances. In many cases they are highly specific to the socioeconomic circumstances in which they operate.

Many formal women's NGOs organize around common interests identified by their members. Such organizations often bring together women from different social groups. Organizations working to aid victims of domestic violence provide one example of women's identification of common “interests”. Women's trade union organizations provide another. Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), for example, was created in 1972 to fight for the rights of self-employed women workers (piece-rate workers and petty commodity producers) in India. As well as setting up a lending and savings bank, its focus has been on organizing isolated workers into a series of cooperatives with managers employed by SEWA. Westwood's (1991) study of SEWA's work highlights its success in generating and reproducing a collective consciousness among women workers. Unlike some of the literature on women's NGOs, however, Westwood does not underestimate the difficulties inherent to sustaining SEWA's work.

Overall, SEWA cooperatives have helped to strengthen a collective consciousness and a political will to be recognized as workers. Ironically, in meeting this goal, SEWA cooperatives undermine their own chances of survival. As Westwood puts it, “workers will not easily relinquish wages for a brave new world of enterprise” (1991:302). In one SEWA cooperative, for example, attempts to control productivity by moving from steady wages to a piece-rate system provoked a struggle between management and workers that exposed class tensions. The cooperatives find it very difficult to sustain the level of income generation needed to continue.

The emphasis on gaining recognition for women's rights as workers leads to some interesting contradictions—within the cooperatives women bargain for recognition of their “traditional” skills in weaving or hand-stitching, for example. The cooperatives often end up subsidizing women's wages and the women workers resist moves to upgrade skills

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<sup>37</sup> Some have argued that hierarchical (and bureaucratic) means are antithetical to feminist ends (Ferguson, cited in Young 1990). It is now widely recognized that women's organizations are beset with problems of hierarchy. One of the consequences of the idea that all “hierarchy is bad” has been lack of structure within women's organizations and the emergence of charismatic leadership. Women (like men) have real difficulty in creating and maintaining organizations that are participatory, conflict-free and functional (Yudelman, cited in Young 1990).

for entry into more lucrative luxury markets. In other words, women take the gender division of labour with them into the cooperatives: they tend to focus on certain trades (“women’s work”) and their work is still seen as unskilled outside the cooperatives. While the space SEWA provides self-employed women for solidarity and collective action is significant, its success in challenging the gender division of labour and the low value attached to women’s work beyond the cooperative is more limited. One strategy has been the legal fight for women’s access to space and goods in markets controlled by men (Westwood 1991:305). But SEWA’s experience, with all its achievements, illustrates the fundamental point that civil society organizations cannot substitute for the powers that states have in regulating markets (UNRISD 1994). Efforts at mainstreaming gender concerns into state policies should therefore remain high on the agenda of those striving for a more gender-egalitarian order.

The point of illustrating some of the limitations of women’s organizations is not to undermine the importance of the work being done by many of these groups. Rather, what we have tried to suggest in this section is that a more critical approach to the strengths and weaknesses of NGOs would help women and development advocates to clarify their thinking on “participatory planning” and “bottom-up” strategies. Is the present optimism of the role to be played by women’s NGOs justifiable? Are women’s NGOs any more likely to overcome problems encountered by women and development advocates within public institutions? Do bottom-up strategies not ultimately confront some of the same constraints and obstacles as those working from the top down? These are questions that deserve further consideration by women and development advocates. For example, one of the criticisms of top-down strategies found in the women and development empowerment literature is that Western donor agencies impose their assumptions and agendas on developing countries. In view of the growing proportion of donor funding being made available to NGOs, it is difficult to imagine how NGOs will resist becoming influenced by the objectives of donor agencies.

## Concluding Remarks

This chapter set out to examine some of the main trends in the way women’s issues have been conceptualized in the context of development. One of the prominent themes emerging from our account has been a distinct strand of thinking—stretching from the early WID writings to the more recent “gender efficiency” theses—that combines arguments for gender justice with those of economic efficiency. While successful as a political strategy, in giving women visibility on the development agenda, it has also encouraged the tendency for women’s demands from development to be sidelined.

One of the main tensions that emerge from our comparative account in the above section on Rethinking Women in Development is the extent to which the “social connectedness” or “togetherness” of husband and wife should be given analytical weight in analyses of gender relations. A pervasive feature of economic analyses of gender is to use analogies from elsewhere in the economic repertoire. Such analogies, however, tend to be misleading for the way they neglect gender ideologies and the moral dimensions of gender and familial relations. While some economists have begun to adjust their models to reflect the special features of “togetherness” that characterize conjugal and familial relations, others continue to work with the assumption that the interests of household members are completely separate.



Another central tension emerging from that section of the chapter is the extent to which the goal of “gender-aware” development is to be linked to “top-down” or “bottom-up” strategies. Many women and development advocates now emphasize women’s NGOs as key actors in development. The present enthusiasm for NGOs voiced by donors and governments in an effort to roll back the state should be approached with caution by women and development advocates. Women’s NGOs have an important role to play in creating space for women to politicize their demands. But in encouraging NGOs to undertake projects with welfare or production objectives in the hope that this will “empower” women, advocates may be neglecting the need to bring pressure on the state to regulate macro-level forces in a more gender-equitable manner. It is with this goal in mind that possible points of convergence between top-down and bottom-up strategies should be explored by women and development advocates. Hence, in advocating support for women’s NGOs, the objective of mainstreaming WID/GAD concerns should not be abandoned.

The shift from WID to GAD explored in this chapter is based on our reading of a select body of literature. Although the gender discourse has filtered through to policy-making institutions, in this process actors have reinterpreted the concept of gender to suit their institutional needs. In some instances, “gender” has been used to side-step a focus on “women” and the radical policy implications of overcoming their disprivilege. The UNRISD reports<sup>38</sup> on the experiences of states and donor agencies in mainstreaming gender document considerable confusion over the meaning of gender and the policy implications of the discursive shift from “women” to “gender”. While the literature outlined above examines the reasons for this analytical shift, the challenge facing planners and policy makers is to operationalize gender. If this challenge is not met, the discursive shift from WID to GAD, which is occurring in many development institutions, will continue to mystify the project of integrating gender into development policies.

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## Chapter 13

# Missionaries and Mandarins: Feminist Engagement with Development Institutions —An Introduction<sup>1</sup>

*Carol Miller<sup>2</sup> and Shahra Razavi<sup>3</sup>*  
(1998)

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Over the past three decades, a wide spectrum of organizations working in the development field have been scrutinized by feminist activists and scholars for their gender inequitable structures, procedures and policy outcomes. A point made repeatedly in the early women in development (WID) evaluations of development projects was the inability of agricultural innovation practices and extension services to meet their own objectives of increasing rural productivity and incomes because the relevant policy-making institutions systematically overlooked women's roles in the production process (Staudt 1978; Dey 1981). Male farmers tended to receive inputs and extension advice for crops that only women grew. At the same time, women were constructed as needy beneficiaries of underfunded, residual welfare programmes in their roles as homemakers, reproducers and child rearers (Buvinić 1986). But institutionalized bias of this kind is by no means restricted to development organizations. Observers of the US welfare system have identified a similar dualistic structure with a corresponding gender subtext: a masculine subsystem consisting of social insurance schemes that position recipients as right-bearers and citizens, and a feminine "relief", means-tested subsystem that constructs the recipients as "clients of public charity" (Fraser 1989).

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<sup>1</sup> Originally published as the introductory chapter in Miller, Carol and Razavi, Shahra (eds) (1998) *Missionaries and Mandarins: Feminist Engagement with Development Institutions*, Rugby, UK: Practical Action Publishing (Formerly Intermediate Technology Publishing). UNRISD is grateful to Practical Action Publishing for permission to reproduce this work here.

<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing, Carol Miller was Research Associate, Gender Programme, UNRISD. She has written on gender and development, and on gender and international institutions, including historical research on women's issues and the League of Nations. She was also an Associate Lecturer at the Open University, United Kingdom.

<sup>3</sup> At the time of writing, Shahra Razavi was Coordinator of the Gender Programme, UNRISD, where she managed two inter-regional projects, Technical Co-operation and Women's Lives: Integrating Gender into Development Policy, and Gender, Poverty and Well-Being. A specialist in agrarian and development issues, she is the author of numerous publications on gender and development.

Abstracting from these findings, it is no longer acceptable to see the household as the sole bastion of patriarchy. While much of the focus of the early gender and development literature was on domestic institutions where gender relations are most explicit, since the mid-1980s increasing attention has been directed at the ways in which “familial norms and values are constantly drawn on to construct the terms on which women and men enter, and participate, in public life and in the marketplace” (Kabeer 1994:61). The burden of this new genre of feminist analysis has been to demonstrate the extent to which gender operates as a pervasive organizational principle across “impersonal” institutional arenas. In modern industrial firms and in agribusiness ventures, for example, definitions of “skill” and of tasks tend to institutionalize a hierarchical and gendered labour force—each with its own areas of work, wages, patterns of recruitment and promotion prospects (Humphrey 1987; Mackintosh 1989). Similarly, a “gendered archeology of organizations” illuminates the gendered subtexts of apparently neutral organizing structures, practices and ideologies to help explain why they prove so resistant to women and their interests (Goetz 1995).

At the same time, as Naila Kabeer (1994) aptly goes on to argue, because social institutions are organized around quite specific objectives with their own idiosyncratic set of rules and procedures, gender hierarchies are not uniformly woven into institutional structures, but produced dynamically through the interactions of gender/familial ideologies and distinct institutional practices. Institutions are understood to be “the rules of the game...the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction” (North 1990:3) or “the operation of tradition, custom or legal constraint”, which tends to create “durable and routinized patterns of behaviour” (Hodgson 1988:10). In other words, social institutions impose certain parameters on human behaviour that lead to routinized (and thus predictable) patterns of social interaction.

In the context of the policy-making organizations considered in our volume *Missionaries and Mandarins: Feminist Engagement with Development Institutions* (Miller and Razavi 1998), what we are concerned with are the rules, incentives, constraints and “meanings”<sup>4</sup> that contribute to the systematic diversion of resources, values and power away from women and toward men. To give a simple example, the common notion that women are housewives dependent on a male “breadwinner” has tended to deny them a wide range of rights (employment, child custody) and resources (full wage, land, credit)—thereby depriving them of the power and status that come with having full citizenship. The feminist project of de-institutionalizing male bias involves a simultaneous struggle on at least three main fronts: at the discursive level, where women’s interests and needs are constructed and contested; at the institutional level, in defining the rules and procedures that shape the practices of bureaucratic actors; and finally, at the level of resource allocation—“the struggle over the satisfaction of the need” (Fraser 1989:164).

A central question that arises in this context is the choice of institutional strategy. An interesting feature accompanying some strands of feminist critique of development organizations has been the political strategy of “entryism” (Bangura 1997)—a sustained

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<sup>4</sup> A useful definition of the “politics of meaning-making” (also referred to as “discursive politics”) is provided by Katzenstein: “it is discursive in that it seeks to reinterpret, reformulate, rethink, and rewrite the norms and practices of society and the state” (1995:35). At a more general level, the work of feminist social theorists like Nancy Fraser (1989) highlights “struggle over meaning” as one of the most important arenas of contemporary politics.

attempt to enter and gradually transform the host organization from within, changing its procedures, goals and culture along lines that are more gender-equitable.<sup>5</sup>

The dynamics of pursuing transformative agendas from within established bureaucracies—of being “missionaries”, while adapting to the techniques and practices of the bureaucracy as “mandarins” would have to do—is one of the central themes of the volume.<sup>6</sup> Several chapters describe the process of “institutionalizing” gender-equitable bureaucratic practices in state-level institutions (Goetz 1998 and Sawer 1998), multilateral organizations (Miller 1998) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Mayoux 1998). Those chapters explore the national and international forces that led to the creation of new institutional structures and procedures.<sup>7</sup> These changes are meant to adjust organizational practice in such a way as to ensure that bureaucratic outcomes (projects, programmes, policies) are routinely free of male bias. Nonetheless, as several chapters in the volume indicate, rarely have the necessary resources been forthcoming to translate feminist policy ambitions into concrete outcomes.

A further set of issues hotly debated by the various contributors to *Missionaries and Mandarins* is the choice of discursive strategy. One of the central tensions is between feminists advocating “win-win” scenarios that highlight the outcomes of their policies in terms of the “common good” (very often in the language of liberal individualism) and those using confrontational discourses (that tend to be rooted in a more structuralist understanding of women’s subordination). Issues of co-optation and instrumentalism, as well as the risks of neutralizing the transformative nature of the feminist agenda, are raised in several chapters. Others, however, provide a more positive assessment of these discursive strategies, and see the contestation over concepts like “efficiency” as a way of subverting the dominant neoliberal discourse. This is considered to be particularly significant as feminists enter parts of the policy establishment that speak the language of economics.

All of the above can be seen as aspects of a feminist “engagement” strategy, the aim of which is to promote change within existing bureaucratic structures, even if it is recognized that change will be incremental. In view of the tremendous influence exercised by the state and a range of other institutions over every facet of women’s lives—and the gender biases around which their programmes and policies are constructed—these institutions are considered too important to ignore. As Reinelt (1995) puts it, the “politics of engagement” views mainstream institutions as key terrains of political struggle. This approach has been contrasted with the alternative—“disengagement” strategy—which is skeptical of the ability of bureaucracies to promote women’s concerns (Ferguson 1984). According to this latter approach, feminism, like all forms of oppositional discourses, “is endangered by too-close contact with bureaucratic linguistic and institutional forms” (Ferguson 1984:180). The hierarchical and technocratic rationale of modern bureaucracies is seen to be fundamentally opposed to feminist goals. Moreover, from this

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<sup>5</sup> The concept of “entryism” gained currency among Marxist political activists in the post-war period as some militant groups, frustrated by what they saw as the conservatism of their societies, felt that the best way to speed up the prospects of socialist transformation was to enter established social democratic parties and work toward taking them over (Bangura 1997). Activist groups, Bangura maintains, often adopt this strategy because of their general weakness and the realization that independent forms of organization, advocacy and mobilization would not secure the desired objectives.

<sup>6</sup> The inspiration for the title of the volume comes from Ann Summers who talked of two possible models for feminist policy advocacy within the state—the missionary and the mandarin approaches (Summers 1986, cited in Sawer and Groves 1994).

<sup>7</sup> Institutional innovations include the setting up of new structures (WID bureaux, units, focal points, etc.), issuing new procedures (gender guidelines and checklists) and providing gender training programmes.

perspective, the requirements of conformity and loyalty suppress and defuse feminist voices as they enter bureaucracies.

While the feminist strategies described in the volume tend to subscribe to an “engagement” approach, they are grounded in a recognition of the gendered nature of bureaucratic structures and of the role played by powerful institutions in determining development practice and discourse. They reject the view, however, that bureaucracies are monolithic and impermeable. As several chapters illustrate, feminist policy advocates have made greater incursions into institutions or parts of institutions that are more amenable to gender concerns. Miller, for example, suggests that it has been easier to argue the case for attention to gender concerns in an institution like the International Labour Organization (ILO), which is committed to social justice, than in one like the World Bank, with its emphasis on economic efficiency and growth (Miller 1998). Similarly, the parts of bureaucracies that deal with social issues have been more penetrable than those that focus on economic policy. Over the past decade, feminist policy advocates have sought to infiltrate the more resistant institutional structures, including those concerned with economic policy, with varying degrees of success—as the chapters by Goetz, Sawer, Razavi and Miller illustrate.

### **State-Civil Society Relations**

Notwithstanding the processes of globalization and democratization referred to in several chapters of *Missionaries and Mandarins*, the state remains the main forum of national decision making. It continues to play a central role in laying down the parameters for the institutional and market frameworks that govern citizens’ social, political and economic options (Joekes 1995). It is not surprising, therefore, that women’s movements over the past century have targeted the state and continue to do so. In describing feminist “engagement” with state institutions, the chapters in this volume nonetheless present a contradictory picture of how women’s groups view the state.

On the one hand, Goetz (1998) and Naciri (1998) observe a reticence on the part of some women’s groups about direct involvement with the state and political parties. Such a view is underpinned by more than a decade of feminist theorizing about the role of the state in perpetuating gender disadvantage (Connell 1990; Cockburn 1991). As noted earlier, public policies in modern welfare states have constructed women’s identity around social relations of dependency on male income-earners with far-reaching implications for women’s position as rights-bearers and citizens (Fraser 1989). Similarly, state institutions and legal systems in both the North and the South have upheld women’s structurally unequal position in the family by sanctioning gender-differentiated practices in political and economic participation and inheritance rights, and by tacitly condoning domestic and sexual violence against women. On the other hand, as several chapters in *Missionaries and Mandarins* demonstrate (including those by Goetz and Naciri), feminist practice in many countries has demonstrated achievements from working through state institutions.

The debate between feminist “engagement” and “disengagement” strategies is in many ways rooted in the conflicting views of the state: a vehicle for social justice versus a protector of male interests. Recent feminist formulations have attempted to reconceptualize this ambivalence about the state, pointing to its *contradictory* role in constructing *and* de-constructing gender disadvantage. Waylen (1995) sees the state as



another institutional site of political struggle around the construction of women's interests and identities. She argues, however, that the state should not be seen as a unitary structure but as a differentiated set of institutions and practices that are the product of a particular historical and political conjuncture. As such, the relationship between the state and gender relations is not fixed or immutable. While the state can reinforce gender disadvantage, opportunity structures exist within it that can be used by women's movements to challenge unequal gender relations. It follows, therefore, that feminist analyses of state-civil society relations must be historically, culturally and politically grounded. Feminist engagement with the state in any given context will be shaped by historical legacies and political traditions, the nature of the state and its basis of legitimacy, the openness of civil society and the relative power of its constituent parts, and the relations between the state and civil society.<sup>8</sup>

The comparative country case studies of state-civil society relations in *Missionaries and Mandarins* confirm the importance of historically and contextually grounded analyses. Chapters by Goetz (1998) and Naciri (1998) point to the historical legacies of political liberation movements in shaping the discursive and practical strategies of women's movements in selected Southern countries. In the chapter by Sawyer, the history of feminist engagement with the state in Australia, Canada and New Zealand is located within the political tradition of social liberalism shared by these countries. The chapter traces the challenges posed to feminist advocacy in the fiscally conservative 1980s and 1990s as these countries experienced a fundamental rethinking of the role of the state. Interestingly, Sawyer points out that feminist theorizing about the state emerged in the United Kingdom and the United States—both countries where feminists' interventions in the state were relatively underdeveloped. She contrasts this with the experience in Australia, Canada and New Zealand, where women's movements have tended to see the state as a vehicle for social justice; the 1970s feminist ideology and practice that emerged out of the American women's liberation movement—summed up in the slogan “women and revolution” not “women and bureaucracy”—have never been fully embraced in these countries. These examples also provide an interesting contrast with the experiences of many Southern countries described in other chapters in the volume.

In her chapter, Goetz demonstrates that changes in political systems—such as the transitions from military dictatorships to democracies in Chile and Uganda—also provide opportunities for articulating women's interests and furthering feminist agendas. With the exception of Viet Nam, the process of democratization in all of the country case studies has provided new openings for women to mobilize and put pressure on the state, although the degree to which autonomous women's organizations have emerged as a political force varies from country to country. Feminist scholarship on women's movements has shown that, even where women have organized alongside men in oppositional politics to bring about regime changes and greater democratization, they have often been unable to sustain their visibility in the new power configurations that emerge or to organize effectively around women's interests (Jaquette 1994). While the country case studies provided in the chapters by Goetz and Naciri tend to support this thesis, there is some evidence of women's constituency building and the consolidation of women's political influence. For the reasons outlined in Goetz's chapter, however, the process of liberalization in Viet Nam—as in other

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<sup>8</sup> Bangura (1997) also draws attention to the way in which different political systems/cultures shape possibilities for policy dialogue on gender issues.

transitional economies—has tended to undermine women’s political participation and, thus far, there has been very little political space available to nurture autonomous civil society groups. As such, policy advocacy on women’s issues is still largely the purview of state or party institutions, in particular the Vietnamese Women’s Union, the Communist Party’s mass organization of women.

Naciri’s chapter locates contemporary feminist politics in Morocco within a momentous conjuncture of a variety of political forces: the process of democratization; the increased political prominence of Islamic fundamentalist interests; and the state’s search for (economic and political) legitimacy in the eyes of the international community. The chapter provides a rich analysis of the way these forces have conditioned the constraints and “opportunity structures” available to the women’s movement in its efforts to influence the state. Indeed, a variety of strategies have been pursued by the women’s movement, many of which are not mutually exclusive. Some women’s organizations have sought a *rapprochement* with secular, leftist political parties in order to help counteract Islamic political interests. Similarly, they have endeavoured to exploit the contradictions evident in the self-declared modernism of the state (including a commitment to women’s rights) and its efforts to appease traditional political elements by marginalizing the feminist agenda.

At the same time, in view of the fact that the discourse on women’s issues in Morocco has been shaped by religious and cultural traditions, even within the parties of the left, some women’s groups have sought to engage Islam directly and to make it more inclusive, for example through an egalitarian reinterpretation of the Koran. For other women, especially from poorer social groups, Islam has been adopted as a “strategy of resistance”, symbolized most vividly by the donning of the *hijab* (veil) which, Naciri argues, provides a certain status and more freedom of movement in an otherwise oppressive social and economic environment. A similar point is made by Waylen (1992) in her analysis of the widespread mobilization around very traditional pronouncements about women and motherhood that was one of the many forms of political action undertaken by Chilean women under Pinochet’s regime. By placing the Moroccan women’s movement within its national political/religious context, Naciri’s chapter illuminates the highly diverse forms of political action by women, which can be seen to constitute feminist politics.

### **Working within and against the State**

More specifically, a key dimension of state–civil society relations that chapters in *Missionaries and Mandarins* (Miller and Razavi 1998) explore is the relationship between femocrats<sup>9</sup> (insiders) and organized women’s movements (outsiders). Feminist “engagement” strategies involve both “entryism”, as described, for example, in Sawyer’s chapter on femocrats within state institutions, and continuous pressure from the women’s movement(s) on the outside, a point made most forcefully in the chapter by Goetz. In the chapters of the volume, feminist policy advocacy within state (and other) bureaucracies is viewed as a complement and not an alternative to women’s organization and activism on the outside. Even in the context of “disengagement” strategies, where

<sup>9</sup> The term “femocrats”—or feminist bureaucrats—refers to feminists who went into the women’s policy positions created in Australia in the 1970s; the word is now in common usage.

feminists work solely through independent women's organizations, some form of engagement with the state and mainstream institutions is unavoidable (Reinelt 1995). Women's organizations are often shaped and mobilized in response to the policies of state institutions that are seen to be antithetical to women's interests; it follows that feminist activism involves challenging the structure and practices of these institutions (Gelb 1995). It is for these reasons that women's movements have sought to develop structures of interest articulation and representation within state institutions. Strategically positioned within the state, femocrats are, in theory, well situated to identify and take advantage of the political opportunity spaces to push forward a feminist agenda. But their position working "within and against the state" (London-Edinburgh Weekend Return Group 1979) raises questions of "legitimacy" in the eyes of both their colleagues within the bureaucracy and the women's movement on the outside.<sup>10</sup>

The strategy of implementing change "from within" demands a wide range of skills on the part of gender advocates or "femocrats", which can be most usefully summarized under the headings of "technical" and "political". Polsby (1985) refers to these internal advocates as "policy entrepreneurs" in order to draw attention to the innovative nature of their work in identifying new issues, skillfully mobilizing facts about them that can serve as a justification for action, and cultivating internal allies whose support can help promote policy change. As several of the contributions to the volume demonstrate, tampering with the nuts and bolts of a bureaucracy in the context of a highly sophisticated policy development process requires an in-depth understanding of how the bureaucratic machinery works. Gender advocates also need to have astute political skills in order to identify where the strategic points of leverage in the policy establishment are and how allies can be cultivated despite the distrust of traditional bureaucrats.

One policy area that has been particularly resistant to feminist incursions has been macroeconomic decision making—the purview of powerful ministries of finance. Gender machineries in both national and international agencies still have difficulty making inroads in this field, which continues to be dominated by men schooled in "gender-blind" neoclassical economics. But having the competence and confidence to both understand and question economic policy requires fluency and skill in economic analysis (Pearson 1995). The growing body of work by feminist economists provides a potential resource that gender machineries can use to help them to focus on the design of policy reforms and to facilitate communication with the economists who dominate macroeconomic policy making (Elson and McGee 1995). The gender machineries in a number of governments and international agencies have begun to use this body of knowledge in their efforts to integrate a gender perspective into programme and policy assistance (Pearson 1995; Miller and Razavi 1998).

And finally, as highlighted in Goetz's contribution to *Missionaries and Mandarins*, to ensure that policy commitments to women do not remain trapped on paper, gender advocates need financial analysis skills that can tie those policy commitments to budget allocations. In Australia, innovative Women's Budget Statements, which require all government departments and agencies to account for the impact of their activities on women, have been introduced by gender machineries, but the utility of this model in

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<sup>10</sup> While the discussion in this section focuses on relations between women inside state institutions and women's movements on the outside, the tensions described regarding the dual loyalties of femocrats (vis-à-vis their professional colleagues and the women's movement) also apply to women working inside other institutions explored in *Missionaries and Mandarins* (for example, multilateral institutions and non-governmental organizations).

other contexts where the budgetary process is less reliable and established and the public administration weakened by severe financial strain, is questioned by Goetz.

While some gender machineries manage to demonstrate considerable dexterity in both budgetary and policy analysis, many of those described in this volume suffer from skill shortages. The fact that in most cases gender machineries remain understaffed and underresourced accentuates this problem. In many Southern countries, concerns for fiscal prudence and economic stabilization have, over the course of the past few decades, significantly weakened the capacity of the public administration to carry out its remaining areas of responsibility (Bangura 1994; UNICEF/UNDP 1995). The phenomenon of “moonlighting” by civil servants is a stark indication of the changing orientation of bureaucrats in such contexts. In the face of deeply entrenched bureaucratic malaise in many countries, “getting institutions right for women” (IDS 1995) is a formidable challenge.

In addition to the skills needed to foster alliances and establish legitimacy within the bureaucracy, women in public administration need a range of others to maintain legitimacy in the eyes of the women’s movement. This is a crucial part of their policy advocacy work, for as Sawer’s chapter demonstrates, organized external pressure has played an indispensable role in pushing through feminist policy initiatives in Australia, Canada and New Zealand. Several chapters confirm that internal policy advocacy is underpinned by an effective external political base. Aware of this fact, femocrats have developed political skills and strategies for “bridge-building” with the women’s movement in order to foster external pressure. Bridge-building has taken a number of forms including consultation mechanisms, information sharing and, in some cases, resourcing the women’s movement. A comment by a femocrat from New Zealand, quoted by Sawer, neatly captures femocrats’ understanding that achieving feminist policy goals depends on concerted public action in support of these goals by the women’s movement: “I don’t feel threatened by those women outside who say that we aren’t doing enough”.

In several of the case studies described by Goetz (1998), the iterative relationship between women’s units in public administration and women’s constituencies in civil society has proven more difficult to establish or exploit. Women’s NGOs often demonstrate a reluctance to become too closely associated with WID/gender and development (GAD) bureaucrats—which in itself reflects a healthy concern about retaining autonomy, but makes strategic collaboration difficult. Again, it is useful to locate such concerns in the broader history of state-civil society relations. Women’s groups, particularly national umbrella organizations, have been vulnerable to political co-optation. In several countries, the energy of the women’s movement was largely co-opted by political parties and channelled into the liberation movements of the 1970s and 1980s. More recently, as Goetz argues, the WID/GAD agenda has been used by dominant political parties as a means either of demonstrating their progressive attitudes to the international community or of reinforcing their political support base to include women’s constituencies. These factors, in addition to the visibility of wives or female relatives of national leaders in high political positions, have led to a certain wariness about mainstream politics and party-linked WID units or women’s associations.

Similarly, femocrats who are career civil servants and have not therefore “cut their teeth” in the women’s movement are often viewed with suspicion by those on the outside. An example cited in Sawer’s (1998) chapter is instructive. During the 1980s, relations

between the Australian women's movement and the Office of the Status of Women<sup>11</sup> reached a low point when an economist without a background in the women's movement headed the Office and was perceived by outsiders to have capitulated on key policy issues. Conversely, feminist activists who move into the bureaucracy are often accused of co-optation (Sawer and Groves 1994). The migration of the leaders of the women's movement into the state can also have the effect of decimating the women's movement, as was observed in Chile after the downfall of Pinochet (Waylen 1995) and, more recently, in post-apartheid South Africa (Meer 1997)—thus undermining the political base for internal gender advocacy.

At the same time, the perception that femocrats have little legitimacy within state institutions can also impact negatively on insider-outsider relations. In Morocco, for example, where women's policy machinery is the least developed among the countries described in *Missionaries and Mandarins* (Miller and Razavi 1998), the women's movement seems to bypass women in public administration and to work primarily on the outside or through alliances with political parties. In fact, the WID/GAD bureaucracies within government departments mentioned in the chapter by Goetz are not even referred to in Naciri's chapter—reinforcing the view that in Morocco they are not perceived by the women's movement as key players. Overall, then, the chapters in *Missionaries and Mandarins* point to the importance of strong external women's constituencies to support internal gender policy advocacy; at the same time they depict the complex and often mutually distrustful nature of relations between insiders and outsiders—a theme we will explore further.

## Instrumentalism and Co-optation

Several of the chapters in *Missionaries and Mandarins* reflect on the issues of co-optation and instrumentalism, which are inevitably raised when feminists make public policy claims—either as femocrats working “inside” mainstream bureaucracies, or even as activists/scholars sitting outside the policy establishment but engaging with it through advocacy work that takes their discursive politics into the public arena. In many instances femocrats and activists alike have tended to make the tactical choice of framing their policy goals in universalist—rather than confrontational—terms. They have demonstrated positive spin-offs from their policy recommendations in order to increase the appeal of their campaign to a broader public and to press their claims successfully against rival claimants. As Katzenstein puts it, “feminist interest groups are often very word conscious, usually out of calculated instrumentality as to what phraseologies will ‘work’” (1995:36). A cursory glance at WID's short history would show that a dominant theme in its advocacy has been to highlight the “high pay-offs of investing in women” (Goetz 1994; Razavi and Miller 1995<sup>12</sup>). The phrase coined by the *Human Development Report* (UNDP 1995:1): “development, if not engendered, is endangered” succinctly captures the type of “win-win scenario” that WID advocates have been promoting.

This strategy, however, takes on a particularly problematic turn in the context of the economic rationalist arguments that have dominated national and international

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<sup>11</sup> Now known simply as the Office for Women.

<sup>12</sup> Editor's note: Razavi and Miller 1995 is included as chapter 12 in the present volume.

policy agendas over the past two decades. As several of the contributors to *Missionaries and Mandarins* observe, with the growing influence of the neoliberal philosophy, which is inherently opposed to policy interventionism aimed at achieving social equity, feminist policy advocates have been persuaded to make a range of instrumental arguments that link gender equity to more “legitimate” policy concerns, such as growth and market efficiency. Razavi looks at a new genre of feminist scholarship/advocacy that engages with mainstream economists on their own terms, using neoclassical efficiency discourse. Many of the demands that have been raised traditionally by equal rights activists as human rights issues, are now reframed as “gender-based distortions” (to parallel the neoclassical obsession with “price distortions”) causing allocative inefficiency. Discrimination against women in land and credit markets, for example, is constructed as a “gender-based market distortion” because resources are not free to go to those who can make best economic use of them (Palmer 1991). Similarly, Sawyer discusses the temptation on the part of femocrats in Australia to justify even basic human rights issues, such as domestic violence, in terms of its economic costs. Arguments like these, their advocates suggest, may be “heard” more readily by those bent on promoting economic growth and removing market distortions than would equity-based discourses. But are some critical items on the feminist agenda lost in the process of making this political choice?

The contributors to *Missionaries and Mandarins* provide divergent interpretations of instrumentalism and its consequences. A critical understanding of instrumental strategies is voiced by both Goetz and Mayoux. The reframing of gender equity concerns in terms of social and economic efficiency gains, they argue, has the effect of de-politicizing the issue and runs the risk of making women more perfectly exploitable for development. As it has been argued elsewhere, the tendency to highlight the usefulness (for development) of investing in women can mean an intensification of women’s workloads as the onus shifts to them to extend their unpaid work as feeders, healers and teachers of children to include the provision of basic services to the community (Kandiyoti 1990; Goetz 1994).

Some of the other contributors, however, adopt a more agnostic approach. Razavi argues that in the world of “real”—as opposed to “abstract”—politics, strategic alliances, compromises and instrumental arguments are not aberrations; they are part of the everyday reality that constitutes feminist politics worldwide and have allowed gender concerns to be brought into bureaucracies immured intractably in particular procedural and cognitive mindsets—albeit not always in their purest form. The feminist effort to redefine the meaning of “efficiency” along lines that can encompass items on the WID/GAD agenda can be seen as an attempt to subvert the neoliberal agenda using its own tools. As Nancy Fraser aptly observes, policy-making institutions tend to depoliticize certain matters by economizing them: “the issues in question here are cast as impersonal market imperatives, or as ‘private’ ownership prerogatives, or as technical problems for managers and planners, all in contradistinction to political matters” (1989:168). Seen in this light, the struggle over the meaning of concepts like “efficiency” and “market distortions” politicizes the supposedly neutral (and technical) space occupied by economics, and turns it into a key terrain of political struggle.

But it is not just the “technical” discourse of economics that feminists have sought to reinterpret and reformulate. Feminists—both lay and religious—have also been actively engaged in the reinterpretation of religious texts and doctrines. In several Muslim countries where women’s civil and political rights have been repeatedly infringed under the feeble pretext that equal rights is a Western import, a critical site of feminist struggle has been to reinterpret the Koran and the Shari’a (Islamic law) in an effort to rupture the

monopoly that patriarchal institutions have thus far exercised over the interpretation of religious texts (Mernissi 1991). In her analysis of Moroccan feminist politics, Naciri sees an important role for feminist researchers who seek to show that an alternative interpretation of the Koran is not only possible but also desirable in order to bring Islam up to date with the exigencies of the contemporary world. Similarly, within the American Catholic Church, feminists have created a strong counterdiscourse in response to the words, rituals and symbols that emanate from the Vatican (Katzenstein 1995).

A more general point about the feminist concern with instrumentalism, as Naciri reminds us, is that women are not “instruments”. In Morocco, for example, women have used education to pursue their own agendas in ways that were not necessarily expected or desired by nationalists who initially advocated female education on highly instrumental grounds. Along similar lines, Sawyer illustrates how an instrumental interest in women’s votes was exploited by femocrats to obtain large childcare commitments from the Australian Labor Party before the 1984 and 1993 federal elections. In both instances the instrumentalist policies and strategies of decision makers (often male) have been confounded by women who, either as individuals or in an organized manner, have pursued their own agendas and priorities.

Nevertheless, the tension between wanting to live up to feminist ideals and having to appeal to a wider public is one that both feminist activists and practitioners confront on a daily basis. In some instances these political actors have been able to increase the appeal of their campaign to a broader public by deliberately choosing universalist discourses, but without compromising the feminist goals for which they are striving. In other words, instrumentalist discourses need not automatically lead to co-optation and a watering down of feminist demands. An example from feminist strategies in the United States during the 1980s, when the antifeminist backlash was at its worst, clarifies this point:

Despite the intrinsic radicalness of the feminization of power concept, the Feminist Majority have been able to package the idea as a liberal concern with equality. The effectiveness of this liberal packaging has been the true genius of the Feminist Majority...The undertones of policy overhaul and radical change in the way society is structured are to be found in the Feminist Majority literature but only if one is really looking for them. As a result the Feminist Majority have clearly been able to combine an appeal to both liberal and radical sections within the populace (cited in Spalter-Roth and Schreiber 1995:118).

## **Rethinking the Insider-Outsider Dynamics**

A number of forces gathering momentum in recent years—the increasing permeability of national boundaries and the consequent weakening of the state, as well as the growing importance of civil society organizations operating at both national and international levels—are changing the parameters within which insiders and outsiders operate. On the one hand, as discussed below, the growing prominence of the “international women’s movement”, underpinned by a wide range of formal and informal mechanisms at the international level, provides greater opportunities for enforcing state accountability to its female constituents. At the same time, North-South tensions complicate the task of national women’s movements in using these international linkages to strengthen their position vis-à-vis the state. On the other hand, the weakening and ideological discrediting of the state has created unrealistic expectations of what the “NGO sector” is capable of

delivering—particularly to women. A better recognition of the institutionalized male bias within many NGOs, and of the implausibility of substituting the leading role of the state (in mobilizing resources and setting standards for major social service and development programmes) with patchy and uncoordinated NGO services, highlights the importance of continued feminist engagement with the state.

### ***The international women's movement and globalization***

Many of the chapters in *Missionaries and Mandarins* refer to the role played by the international women's movement in getting gender issues on the global agenda—both in relation to the general principles affirmed in international human rights instruments and the commitments emerging out of the main UN conferences of the past two decades. Chapters by Goetz and Sawyer explore the way in which women's organizations can strategically exploit governments' international commitments. For example, when governments ratify international legislation or express support for principles agreed upon at UN world conferences, they set themselves up for international scrutiny and for comparison with other nations. Since most countries wish to protect their reputations vis-à-vis the international community, femocrats are able to use this sensitivity both to promote gender equity at the international level and to press their own governments to implement relevant international obligations. A recent analysis of NGO activity at UN conferences also indicates that NGOs take advantage of the ease of access to senior government officials at these international events and use the opportunity to pursue their ongoing domestic lobbying as well as to influence their government's position in conference negotiations (Krut 1997)—a point that Sawyer's discussion on the Australian efforts at the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, appears to confirm.

Contributions to *Missionaries and Mandarins* thus illustrate how the intersection of international and domestic pressure and networking has advanced the feminist agenda within different institutional contexts. Despite the diversity of the institutions discussed in the volume—from Southern NGOs (Mayoux 1998) and states (Goetz 1998), to Northern states (Sawyer 1998) and international organizations (Miller 1998)—the instruments used for promoting change have been remarkably uniform. Mayoux, for example, refers to the “convergence” in language and approach to gender issues evident in the work of NGOs, governments and multilateral institutions. This is perhaps an indication of the strength of the international women's movement in setting norms and in providing a medium for interaction, negotiation and the exchange of lessons across national boundaries. The uniformity of approach, however, begs the question of how far there is a unidirectional flow of information and ideas from the North to the South. A case in point is the term “gender”, which, as Goetz observes, derives from an Anglo-American understanding of the social construction of gender difference and fails to translate easily into other languages.

On the issue of interlinkages among different levels of feminist activity, Miller's chapter considers the impact of the international women's movement and supportive bilateral donors on the way gender issues have been taken up in selected multilateral organizations and are reflected in the programmes these organizations support in developing countries. The chapter by Goetz confirms that the international development community has played an important role in supporting and resourcing national-level gender initiatives. The influence of external pressure, she argues—including that from multilateral organizations—has served a useful purpose in the absence of strong national women's constituencies and/or of national resources for gender and development activities. Mayoux's chapter indicates that funding from external donors—multilateral and



bilateral organizations and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs)—has also played a role in supporting the efforts of national and local NGOs to make governments more responsive to women's needs.

At the same time, several chapters in *Missionaries and Mandarins* suggest that a donor-driven WID/GAD agenda may have adverse long-term implications for the legitimacy of gender issues at the national level. Chapters by Goetz and Naciri refer to ambiguities over commitment to a feminist agenda in contexts where governments take up gender issues primarily to demonstrate their progressive attitudes to the international community and/or in response to financial incentives provided by foreign donors. Reliance on external resourcing also raises problems of sustainability once funding is cut back. More importantly, external funding lends to the idea that the feminist agenda embodied in activities promoted by international development organizations is a foreign import, thereby stigmatizing and undermining efforts of indigenous women's movements. The problem is wider than government accusations of "cultural imperialism". As Goetz's contribution to the volume suggests, WID bureaucrats express frustration at the lack of "national ownership" over the WID/GAD agenda, implying that it is imposed by Northern donors and often fails to reflect the realities of women's lives in a particular country context. A striking example of the lack of fit between donor approaches to WID/GAD and local realities is the focus on small-scale and informal sector income-generating projects found in the activities of the Bureau of Women's Affairs in Jamaica. Income-generating projects may be popular with donors but seem out of place in a country with extremely high rates of female participation in formal employment.

The lack of "national ownership" over the WID/GAD agenda raises the related issue of North-South divides in feminism, particularly the claim that the feminist agendas of Northern donors reflect only the concerns of Northern feminists. Since the 1970s there have been tensions between feminists in the North and South on how the problem of women in development should be conceptualized. Women of the South have been instrumental, though not alone, in framing women's search for equity and social justice within an analysis of the unequal political and economic structures within which women were located.<sup>13</sup> Through a structuralist analysis of class and gender relations, attention has been drawn to the highly varied, and often polarizing, implications of development—especially in the context of the spread of the global market economy. As described elsewhere, this contrasted sharply with the liberal feminist quest for formal equality with men and the WID preoccupation with integrating women into market-led development (Kabeer 1994; Razavi and Miller 1995). Chapters in *Missionaries and Mandarins* (particularly the one by Razavi) suggest that this tension continues to characterize current feminist approaches to gender and development. North-South tensions are likely to continue to manifest themselves as long as the development policies pursued by Northern institutions are seen to perpetuate structural inequalities between the North and the South. North-South tensions are also fuelled by "identity" politics, which remain a powerful factor in shaping the relations between Northern and Southern NGOs.

In Mayoux's chapter, she observes that, in working with women from the South, Northern INGOs have learned to avoid assuming a common agenda. Where commonalities of interest can be identified—for example, around issues concerning women's human rights—shared agendas for action have been agreed and form part of the

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<sup>13</sup> Benería and Sen 1981; Sen and Grown 1988; Elson and Pearson 1981.

INGOs' programmes in the South. Even those wary of the influence Northern perspectives exercise over the international agenda point to the importance of finding common ground for advocacy work—with the caveat that differences need to be recognized and handled in a positive way (Jain 1996; Ronquillo-Nemanzo 1996). Networks and alliances established in connection with the UN world conferences (UNCED, the Vienna Conference on Human Rights, the Social Summit, ICPD and Beijing) indicate the tremendous potential for solidarity and united action by the international women's movement (Jain 1996).

Gita Sen (1996:4) refers to this process as the “globalization of feminist politics” and argues that the weakening of the nation state and globalization provide new possibilities for political mobilization and global action around women's rights. One example she gives concerns the recent debate on reproductive and sexual rights, which worked itself from the local or national to the global level. This made it possible to clarify and expand understandings in a more inclusive manner and to embrace “not only the commonality but also the diversity of women's concerns worldwide”. The expanded meanings—affirming women's rights to control their bodies and to express female sexuality—influenced the discourse on reproductive and sexual rights in the UN conferences in Cairo and Beijing and were reflected in the official documents emerging from these events.

Sen's (1996) analysis suggests that real exchange of ideas and information between Northern and Southern feminists is possible. A survey of NGOs active in recent UN conferences suggests a similar conclusion. The findings indicate that many NGOs attend these international events, not only to influence governments but also to influence other NGOs, and define linkages with other NGOs as their major success stories. Their strategy has been two-pronged: to learn as much as possible about the issues; and to lobby larger, Northern NGOs with better and more effective access to funding and to sympathetic governments (Krut 1997). Although the chapters in *Missionaries and Mandarins* diverge over the extent to which the global feminist agenda represents an equal exchange of ideas among constituent groups of the international women's movement, they tend to support the thesis that globalization presents new opportunities to be seized in making the process more inclusive.

### **Participation, decentralization and NGOs**

“Participatory”, or “bottom-up”, development is not a new item on the development agenda. Interest in “participatory approaches” has nevertheless been rekindled in recent years and major donor organizations have taken steps to change their centralized top-down working procedures, in some cases by working more intensively through NGOs. In many countries the political transition from military dictatorships to pluralist and democratic political set-ups has provided the setting for the emergence of an active and vibrant civil society, including women's groups and NGOs. Also influential at this juncture has been the shrinkage of state resources and the ideological discrediting of bureaucratized state services (especially in the poorer countries), which in some instances has meant that NGOs are the last option for meeting needs previously considered to be the responsibility of the state (Wolfe 1994). A consensus thus seems to be emerging that confirms the relative advantages of participatory approaches, and of NGOs as the agents

most capable of realizing the assumed advantages.<sup>14</sup> Not surprisingly, the optimism regarding NGOs' abilities to solve major social problems in an efficient, participatory and innovative manner has been questioned by some of those on the outside, as well as by some NGOs themselves.

One of the implicit assumptions in this consensus, about which there has been much recent controversy, is that through participatory approaches women are more likely to be *heard*, and also the needs that *they* identify are more likely to be met.<sup>15</sup> And, following from that, given the assumed advantages of NGOs in carrying out participatory work—their greater flexibility in reaching the poor and the socially marginalized, and their innovativeness—they are seen as potentially more responsive to women's needs and also more likely to challenge underlying gender inequalities. In other words, the assumption seems to be that NGOs, unlike other development organizations, do not confront institutionalized forms of male bias, centralized decision-making procedures or an overreliance on standardized solutions. In addition to the chapter by Mayoux, which deals extensively with the politics of participatory development in the NGO sector, several other chapters in *Missionaries and Mandarins* provide insights into the different dimensions of this complex set of issues.

Any assessment of NGOs will have to begin with Mayoux's reminder that the NGO sector is large, diverse and changing rapidly. Moreover, the category of organizations generally referred to by the acronym NGO overlaps with interest group organizations, issue-oriented organizations and religious movements (Wolfe 1994). In fact many of the presumed advantages attributed to NGOs, in particular their more participatory credentials, seem to be based partly on the frequent inclusion of small local grassroots membership organizations (GROs) within the definition of NGOs. It is nevertheless notable that a number of NGOs have been at the forefront of developing participatory methodological techniques—including "gender needs assessments" and participatory rural appraisal (PRA)—which enable women and other marginalized groups to voice their choices, perceptions and needs. To assume, however, that participatory techniques will automatically give "voice" to those who have been hitherto excluded through complex forms of social inequality and discrimination seems unduly optimistic.

As Jackson has argued, "For women who are excluded from dominant world views and male vocabularies [Ardener 1975] it is not wise to assume that they can, or will, simply express their priorities as PRA assumes" (1996:500). Mayoux draws attention in her chapter to the nature of gender (and class) politics at the grassroots level, which tends to constrain the ability of women—poor women in particular—to publicly express their needs and interests, especially in group situations. Even where some grassroots organizations have made a considerable effort to create the space to enlist poor women's views, the forms and aims of women's participation have been ultimately determined by male priorities through a process of co-optation.

While populist claims about representing poor women's voices through participatory research methods have to be approached with caution, it would be equally problematic to assume that women cannot voice their true demands. As Mayoux points out, while women tend to internalize the stereotypes of ideal womanly and feminine behaviour and express them in initial consultative meetings (especially in the presence of

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<sup>14</sup> It is significant to note that this is not only at the level of official rhetoric but that it is also reflected in the growing proportion of development funding handled by the NGO sector (see UNRISD 1994).

<sup>15</sup> Jackson 1996; Kabeer 1996; IDS 1997.

men), these may not be as representative of their interests as those expressed after women have had time to reflect or think, or once they have greater awareness of other options. This nuanced understanding of the politics of communication that draws attention to the context specificity of verbal exchanges between “us” (the practitioner/researcher) and “them” (the subjects of PRA) confirms the point made by Kabeer—namely that participatory assessment, like any other research tool, is as gender-blind or as gender-aware as its practitioner (1996).

Participatory methods of information-generation, even if “properly” implemented, will have little impact on policy design unless there are also participatory structures through which grassroots constituencies and field staff can influence policy decision making. The problem of geographical and social distance between the “grassroots” and the centres of decision making is particularly acute in the case of INGOs. In many of these large INGOs, like the multilateral agencies Miller describes in her chapter in *Missionaries and Mandarins*, the main move toward increasing participation has taken the form of regional decentralization to INGO offices overseas and partner NGOs.

Does decentralization bode well for the representation of women’s interests within the policy-making process? Decentralization in the context of multilateral organizations has been driven in part by the realization that national contexts and national priorities have tended to be inadequately reflected in development assistance. In response, organizations like the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) are taking major steps to decentralize their operations further. Miller, however, raises questions about whether strong system-wide WID/gender procedures are in place to ensure that field structures will be responsive to gender issues, and whether there is enough national-level commitment to the WID/gender mandate to keep the issue on the agenda.

Some of the same questions seem to be relevant to INGOs undergoing decentralization. According to institutional insiders, in the short term at least, the process of organizational decentralization seems to have slowed down the implementation of gender policy in some of the larger INGOs. Whether there will be positive spin-offs in the long term, in the form of increased grassroots participation in decision making, is hard to predict. A number of factors are nevertheless likely to affect the outcome of these ongoing efforts to increase grassroots participation in policy design. Most crucially, the pressures of bureaucratic growth (scaling-up), the emphasis on speedy delivery and the competition for external funding are all likely to reduce the incentives for carrying out participatory methods of needs assessment and planning (which tend to be time- and resource-consuming), while they strengthen the incentives for imposing standardized, “blue-print” solutions. Moreover, as convincingly argued by Mayoux in her chapter, increasing women’s (or men’s) participation in decision making does not always lead to the emergence of an explicit or coherent strategy for change; nor can it be assumed to be unambiguously beneficial or “efficient” for the women concerned.

Another critical question that emerges from several contributions to *Missions and Mandarins* is the potential tension between the service delivery and advocacy roles of NGOs, and the important part played by funding agents in fostering the former and muting the latter tendencies. There has been widespread controversy over donor-driven reform strategies that involve NGOs in the delivery of social services in particular regarding implications for social sector provisioning, the role of the state and the social dimensions of citizenship (Vivian 1995). Approaching the problem from the vantage point of poor women, Mayoux voices the concern that some of the current policy interest

in NGOs, and the increasing funding at their disposal, may be merely substituting one inadequate and unresponsive system of service and welfare provision for women (that is, the state system) with another system that is even less well-resourced, less coordinated and even more dependent on women's own unpaid "participatory" labour input. This is a far cry from the oft-mentioned claim that as "conduits of local democracy" NGOs have the potential to ensure that institutions become more accountable and more responsive to the needs of ordinary people (Clark 1991).

In her discussion of participatory efforts in the World Bank, which has involved increasing collaboration with NGOs, Siddharth (1995) argues that thus far there has been a tendency for NGOs (both domestic and international) to act as intermediaries implementing projects, rather than policy advocates challenging policy priorities, influencing resource allocation and changing Bank practice. There are signs, however, of NGOs taking on a greater policy advocacy role. It is also in this latter sense—as policy advocates or "adversaries" vis-à-vis the state and private sector institutions—that Elson (1992) sees a critical place for women's NGOs in bringing about real policy reform and resource allocation in women's favour. This is very much the lobbying mode in which "peak bodies" such as the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) in Canada and the Coalition of Actively Participating Organizations of Women (CAPOW) in Australia function (Sawer). Other examples of attempts by the state to enlist the views of women's organizations in important matters of national concern emerge from Uganda, where an unprecedented process of consultation with women was put in place in 1990 at the initiative of the WID/gender machinery, to collect their views on the country's constitution (Goetz).

Notwithstanding the important policy advocacy role that women's organizations and NGOs can play, the choice between lobbying and service delivery cannot be seen as unproblematic. As Mayoux points out, in some organizations (for example, SEWA) there is emerging disquiet among the grassroots women members about the amount of time and organizational resources spent by the leadership on issues that are seen as being of no direct and immediate benefit to them. In some Southern NGOs the tension over priorities is seen in class terms—as one between urban middle class women and poor women—where the latter group seems to prefer practical interventions (such as tube-wells) as opposed to gender advocacy and lobbying. Ultimately the gains made by the international women's movement through lobbying and political action at the global level—as has been described by Sen (see above)—will have to take into account the tensions that this is causing within some organizations.

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## Chapter 14

# Reproductive and Sexual Rights: Charting the Course of Transnational Women's NGOs<sup>1</sup>

*Rosalind P. Petchesky*<sup>2</sup>

(2000)

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### Introduction

A chorus of testimonies affirm the mutually transforming impact of women's movement non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working transnationally and the series of United Nations conferences held in the 1990s. The commitments and expertise of women's groups shaped much of the discourse of the conferences in Rio, Vienna, Cairo, Copenhagen and Beijing and "helped change the way UN conferences are planned and conducted" (Chen 1996:152). At the same time, the conferences themselves, and the UN system, provided a vital forum and a framework through which a transnational women's movement coalesced. In this process women's groups were able to (i) create effective strategies for influencing international norms and infusing them with feminist perspectives, (ii) learn important lessons about manoeuvring within the world of international diplomats and bureaucrats, and (iii) experience their own power.

Yet, as the decade and century came to a close, economic crises and market-driven policies in ascendance everywhere cast a shadow over these achievements. Although women's NGOs and coalitions have shown their collective ability to win recognition of gender perspectives and human rights in international rhetoric and policy, they have also come up against harsh limits on their power in a *disabling* environment not of their making. This harsher reality has been evident both in the antifeminist, anti-NGO backlash occurring within UN meeting halls since 1995, and in the larger context where economic, social and cultural conservatism block effective implementation of hard-won rights.

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<sup>1</sup> Originally published as an UNRISD Geneva 2000 Occasional Paper (UNRISD, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing, Rosalind P. Petchesky was Professor of Political Science and Women's Studies at Hunter College, City University of New York, the founder and former international co-ordinator of the International Reproductive Rights Research Action Group (IRRRAG) and a MacArthur Fellow.

This chapter will assess recent successes and limitations of women's movements as agents of change in the international arena by focusing particularly on the work of organizations and coalitions active in the field of reproductive and sexual health and rights. Its main purpose is to re-examine this work by casting it in the light of macro-level pressures, such as globalization, privatization and shifting power dynamics within both international organizations and the world of NGOs. The proliferation of transnational NGO activity in recent years, however productive, has a sobering underside. It is one mined with numerous hazards such as bureaucratism, elitism and donor dependence; transformative visions deferred to short-range projects and tactics; and unpaid technical assistance and service provision for national governments and international institutions. Transnational women's groups have not escaped such minefields.

### **Transnational Women's Health Coalitions: Origins and Conceptual Frameworks**

Women's health NGOs and transnational coalitions have been the central authors, advocates and implementers of a politics of reproductive health and rights and, to a somewhat lesser degree, of sexual health and rights.<sup>3</sup> Since, during the 1990s, these concepts became "mainstreamed" as part of an international population and development vocabulary, it is useful to ask what is distinct about women's movement perspectives, what ethical and social visions lie at their core. How, moreover, have the meanings of reproductive and sexual rights shifted as women's groups from the South increasingly become their advocates?

A language and politics of "reproductive rights" had their historical origins in Northern-based women's health movements, particularly in the United States, during the 1970s and early 1980s. These movements were galvanized by conservative attacks on women's access to abortion as well as a feminist political framework privileging women's right to have "control over their bodies" in matters of reproduction and sexuality. In the mid- to late-1980s, when women's movements in the South began to mobilize in their own ways and out of their own situations around reproductive health and rights

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<sup>3</sup> NGOs encompass a broad-ranging spectrum, from (i) grassroots or community-based organizations, to (ii) service or advocacy organizations dependent largely on private or government donors, to (iii) giant non-profits that are funded mainly through public resources and sometimes have budgets larger than those of some poor countries—for example, the International Committee of the Red Cross or CARE International (Weiss and Gordenker 1996). Transnational women's NGOs primarily belong to the second category, although they often grow out of women's movements whose real strength is in the first, and sometimes they form working alliances with mega-organizations that fit the third.

*Reproductive health* is defined in the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action (ICPD POA) as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, in all matters relating to the reproductive system and to its functions and processes. Reproductive health therefore implies that people are able to have a satisfying and safe sex life and that they have the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when and how often to do so. Implicit in this last condition are the rights of men and women to be informed and to have access to safe, effective, affordable and acceptable methods of family planning of their choice, as well as other methods of their choice for regulation of fertility...and the right of access to appropriate health-care services that will enable women to go safely through pregnancy and childbirth and provide couples with the best chance of having a healthy infant" (UNFPA 1995:40, paragraph 7.2).

*Reproductive rights*, as defined in the same document (UNFPA 1995:40, paragraph 7.3), "embrace certain human rights that are already recognized in national laws, international human rights documents and other consensus documents. These rights rest on the recognition of the basic right of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of their children and to have the information and means to do so, and the right to attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health. It also includes their right to make decisions concerning reproduction free of discrimination, coercion and violence". For a definition of *sexual rights*, see below.

questions, a framework firmly linking these issues to both development issues and human rights emerged.<sup>4</sup>

But to reject the concepts of reproductive and sexual health/rights as being a “Western” import makes little sense, unless we are ready to repudiate “democracy”, “freedom”, “national sovereignty” and “development” for the same reason. Ideas are not the property of any one nation or culture; they “travel”, take on new meanings in diverse circumstances and indeed may be used creatively to oppose the very (colonial or post-colonial) powers that once bred those ideas (Ram 1999; Bhasin and Khan 1986). García-Moreno and Claro, who document the diverse trajectories of women’s health movements around the world, make this argument persuasively: “While Western ideas have played a role, women in Southern countries have generated their own analyses, organizations and movements, with and without exposure to the West, and there has been considerable cross-fertilization of ideas—across many countries and continents” (1994:48). During the 1980s and 1990s, especially in the period of the UN conferences, this cross-fertilization contributed to the growing breadth and political sophistication of transnational women’s health movements. Women from the South not only embraced the concept of reproductive rights during this period but also insisted that it must encompass all of women’s reproductive health needs, not only those related to fertility control, and be integrated with a broader development agenda (Corrêa 1994; Silliman 1997).

In its earlier years, the transnational women’s health movement tended to focus its energies on specific campaigns. These campaigns were primarily defences of women’s right to make their own decisions about childbearing, contraception and sexuality and were aimed at both pro-natalist religious and fundamentalist forces, and anti-natalist population control and medical interests. Thus women activists have attempted to secure access to safe, legal and affordable abortion and contraception at the same time as they have opposed such abusive family planning practices as targets and “incentives” for female sterilization and medical technologies considered harmful or inadequately tested in clinical trials (for example, long-acting hormonal implants and injections). While such focused campaigns continue (recently securing policies that ban the chemical sterilization method, quinacrine, in Chile and India), three major influences have stimulated the movement to develop a more comprehensive and affirmative agenda. The first of these is the harsh economic conditions women are suffering, as caregivers and receivers, under structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) and privatization of social services. The second is the fury of fundamentalist movements, whether Islamist or Christian, that aim to resurrect traditional patriarchal values and gender roles, sometimes through direct verbal or physical attacks on women’s groups. Finally, the UN conferences in Cairo and Beijing provided a historic purpose and occasion for women’s health activists working transnationally to develop a broader vision and put it into the language of international documents.

Despite political differences and disparities in access to power and resources (both within and among countries and regions), I would argue that activists and thinkers from the South assumed intellectual and political leadership in shaping a more holistic and integrative direction for the transnational women’s health movement in the 1990s. One group that has been especially forceful in insisting that “women’s reproductive health must be placed within a comprehensive human development framework” is DAWN

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<sup>4</sup> Corrêa 1994; M. Fried 1990; García-Moreno and Claro 1994; Chen 1996; G. Sen 1994a; Silliman 1997.

(Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era), a network of women activists from all regions of the South (Corrêa 1994:64). DAWN's "holistic analysis" of reproductive health and rights links women's health needs—for "access to contraceptive information and methods and legal abortion...STD and cancer prevention, prenatal care and mental health services"—to a wide range of enabling conditions, including "access to housing, education, employment, property rights and legal equality in all spheres" as well as "freedom from physical abuse, harassment, genital mutilation and all forms of gender-based violence". Its vision focuses on universally available "comprehensive health services" that would restore "state responsibility for basic needs" and take priority over "market forces" (Corrêa 1994:58). As the Indian economist Gita Sen, one of DAWN's international coordinators, puts it: "Reproductive health programmes are...likely to be more efficacious when general health and development are served. A poor female agricultural wage-labourer, ill-nourished and anaemic, is likely to respond better to reproductive health care if her nutritional status and overall health improve at the same time" (1994a:223). Such basic conditions as clean water and decent habitations are surely integral to reproductive and sexual health and well-being—for example, using condoms or barrier methods safely, delivering and rearing healthy babies or avoiding sexual abuse. Their absence puts women in untenable dilemmas, such as HIV+ pregnant women who must choose between breastfeeding their infants and exposing them to the risk of AIDS, or bottle-feeding them and exposing them to deadly bacterial infection from contaminated drinking water (Berer 1999).

Contrast these realities with the statement of a delegate from the United States participating in the Third Preparatory Committee Meeting (PrepCom) for Beijing in March 1995. She asserted that the US delegation must oppose a provision of the draft Platform's chapter on health urging governments to "ensure access to safe drinking water and sanitation and put in place effective public distribution systems by the year 2000". This, she argued, was an "infrastructural problem," and such time-based targets were "unrealistic" (Petchesky 1995a:159).<sup>5</sup> Yet, belying the "pragmatic" tone of the US position, there is a profoundly *ethical* truth. For if "infrastructural" conditions and macroeconomic policies create the indispensable enabling environment for reproductive and sexual rights to become practical realities, then those conditions and policies must be incorporated into our ethical framework and seen not only as "basic needs" but also as fundamental human rights. Such social and economic rights are neither more nor less important than those more obviously related to reproduction, sexuality and health; rather, together they form a single fabric of rights that are interdependent, indivisible and *all* grounded in basic human needs.<sup>6</sup>

### ***The ethical framework of reproductive and sexual rights***

Women's movements in different countries and regions often have very different priorities in regard to the aspects of reproductive and sexual health/rights they seek to address. Latin American women's health organizations emerged as part of the broader movements for democratization, in a political climate emphasizing concepts of citizenship and rights. Their emphasis has been on access to quality reproductive and sexual health

<sup>5</sup> In the final Platform for Action, conceding to the US objection, the target date was omitted and replaced by the vague phrase "as soon as possible"; see the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action—United Nations 1995:para.106(x).

<sup>6</sup> The integrative perspective I am applying, and that I have also attributed to DAWN, is similar to that espoused by economist Amartya Sen in numerous writings, most recently his *Development as Freedom* (1999).

services for women as part of their rights as citizens. South Asian women have been primarily concerned with problems of demographic targeting, coercion and promotion of sterilization and long-acting hormonal contraceptives; for them, reproductive rights resonate in the context of donor-driven policies in which local governments are often collusive. Health activists in Africa, confronting dire poverty and the lack of basic services, have been preoccupied by issues of survival: high maternal and infant mortality rates, "safe motherhood", and more recently stemming the tide of HIV/AIDS and reproductive tract infections that are killing so many young women and impairing their fertility.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, the process of working together in networks and coalitions over the past decade and a half has produced common understandings that constitute a shared ethical core. Informing every aspect of this ethical core is a realization drawn from women's everyday experience: that, particularly for women, all human rights have both personal and social dimensions that are intimately connected.

In an article written in preparation for the Cairo conference, Sonia Corrêa and I delineated four principles of a feminist ethical perspective on reproductive and sexual rights: (i) *bodily integrity*, or the right to dignity and respect in one's physical body and to be free from abuses and assaults; (ii) *personhood*, which is closely associated with bodily integrity and implies the right to self-determination and respect in one's decisions about reproduction and sexuality; (iii) *equality* in access to health services and all social resources; and (iv) *diversity*, or the right to be respected in one's group affinities and cultural differences, in so far as these are freely chosen and women are empowered to speak on their own behalf, not subordinated to group claims in the name of "tradition". All four aspects of this framework, we argued, depended on basic *enabling conditions* for women's empowerment and development. In other words, women's empowerment cannot be achieved without transforming the overall social, economic and cultural systems—including but not limited to family and reproductive systems—in which their subordination is entrenched (Corrêa and Petchesky 1994; see also Dixon-Mueller 1993). This means that "differences based on race, power, class and access to resources" (as well as ethnicity and age) must be factored into the calculations of gender differences, including in the gathering of data; and that women must never be "treated as a unitary category...in the international policy dialogue" (Silliman 1997).

The concepts of bodily integrity and personhood, while often seen as the hallmarks of Western liberal philosophy and the value it places on individualism and property ownership, are firmly ensconced in international human rights instruments (Copelon and Petchesky 1995). The "right to life, liberty and security of person" was first recognized in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), repeated in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR 1966) and various regional human rights conventions, and reaffirmed in the ICPD POA's Principle 2. It is the foundation for a wide range of reproductive and sexual rights, including fully informed consent and freedom from coercion with regard to family planning methods; freedom from female genital mutilation (FGM), child marriage or other harmful traditional practices; freedom from sexual abuse, gender violence and sexual trafficking; and the freedom of all persons "to enjoy and control their sexual and reproductive life, having due regard to the

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<sup>7</sup> Alvarez 1990; Silliman 1997; Dixon-Mueller 1993; Berer and Ravindran 1999.

rights of others” (IPPF 1995:13).<sup>8</sup> This genealogy refutes the claim sometimes made in UN conferences that reproductive and sexual rights are “new inventions”.

Based on such established human rights principles, feminists affirm that women’s health and empowerment must be treated as ends in themselves and not merely as means toward other social goals—for example, reducing population numbers, or producing healthy babies to the neglect of women’s health needs (Fathalla 1999). Unfortunately, too many population specialists, economists and public health officials have latched onto the mantra of “women’s empowerment” for precisely these instrumentalist reasons. Silliman points out that “investing in women” has become the “catch phrase...of all the major development organizations” as well as bilateral donor agencies and government ministries, who see women’s education and reproductive health as an efficient means toward their own agendas rather than as fundamental human rights (Silliman 1997).

Such instrumentalism conflicts sharply with the ways in which women’s movements in the South have embraced the concepts of women’s self-determination and right to control over their bodies and adapted those concepts to local women’s situations. Indeed, the campaign against FGM conducted by women’s groups in the Middle East has taken the idea of bodily integrity as its ethical centrepiece and presents itself unequivocally in national and global arenas as a human rights campaign.<sup>9</sup> In a different context, Kalpana Ram charts the “transnationality” of the discourse of “owning our bodies” through the recurrent uses of this slogan by Indian women’s health activists from the 1930s until the 1990s. Her project is to document how “key terms such as choice, autonomy, and freedom are taken up and given different meanings” by women’s groups and the state in different social and cultural settings (Ram 1999:626). As an example, she cites the Indian feminist campaign in the 1980s against prenatal sex selection through amniocentesis, used by middle-class Indian couples to abort female foetuses in the interests of son preference. That campaign, she suggests, did not reject notions of autonomy and women’s right to control their bodies; rather, it recast those concepts in the framework of women’s collective interests and rights to be valued as persons (Ram 1999; Petchesky 1995b).

Like the feminist health movement in India, other Southern women’s groups—and, following their lead, the transnational women’s health movement as a whole—have understood bodily integrity and *individual* rights of the body and person as deeply connected to *social* rights. Without the ability and means to control their fertility and to be self-determined and free from abuse in their sexual lives, women and girls cannot function as responsible, fully participating members of their families and communities; they cannot exercise citizenship (Corrêa and Petchesky 1994). Conversely, being self-determined in their sexuality and fertility depends on many other social and economic components of women’s health, development and empowerment.

A pivotal concept informing feminist standpoints on reproductive and sexual rights is that of *women’s empowerment*. Batliwala gives the most cogent definition of this concept, which she calls “the process of challenging existing power relations and of gaining greater control over the sources of power” (1994:130). While the rhetoric of “empowerment” now abounds nearly everywhere among development specialists and was incorporated into the language of the ICPD POA (thanks to feminist initiatives), its meanings in

<sup>8</sup> The ICPD POA comes closest to articulating the principle of bodily integrity when it links “equal relationships between men and women in matters of sexual relations and reproduction” to “full respect for the physical integrity of the human body” (UNFPA 1995:48, para. 7.34).

<sup>9</sup> See Toubia 1995; Magdy 1999; Seif El Dawla 1999.

mainstream contexts have usually been diluted to become indistinguishable from “raising women’s status” through piecemeal reforms. The discourses of “gender mainstreaming” and “gender sensitivity” likewise imply this mechanistic approach and its assumption that the problem of gender inequality can be fixed by redirecting some resources toward women’s and girls’ education, skills, access to health services and improving “communication” between women and men. Such an approach ignores the deep imbalances of power and the social structures and practices of subordination that characterize relations between women and men in most societies. As Corrêa puts it, “feminists aimed to make visible the power conflicts lurking under the apparently benign asymmetry of status between men and women. But they also were concerned with the linkage between the reshaping of gender power at the micro level and broader social and economic transformation” (Corrêa 1997:2). Gender analysis understands power as not only socially constructed but also dynamic, fluid and always being contested through a wide range of tactics deployed by the “oppressed”—including subversion, subterfuge and sometimes outright resistance.

Finally, feminists have conceptualized empowerment as entailing not only material but also human resources and social, collective interaction. For example, when the International Reproductive Rights Research Action Group (IRRRAG) inquired into the most crucial enabling conditions that allowed some women to resist abusive husbands, disrespectful doctors and religious dictates in making their reproductive and sexual decisions, one of the most salient factors we found was *membership in a community group or union*. Such membership gave women a sense of identity and purpose outside their immediate families (Petchesky and Judd/IRRRAG 1998; IRRRAG 1999).

Feminist concepts of empowerment are closely related to their challenges to mainstream views of “sustainable development”. These include a strong critique of the neo-Malthusian doctrine attributing not only poverty and social unrest but also, more recently, environmental destruction to uncontrolled population growth. From the standpoint of the feminist ethical framework outlined above, this doctrine is pernicious and often racist because it blames the victims of economic injustices (impoverished and dark-skinned women) for problems whose causes lie far from their villages and shanties. By focusing narrowly on strategies to lower fertility, the concept of “overpopulation” provides one of the most enduring rationales for population control policies that have targeted poor women of colour, too often used coercive methods, and disregarded the human rights and basic health needs of those women and their children.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to the ethical and social justice arguments, critics of the neo-Malthusian position and its most recent environmentalist incarnation have countered that position on devastating empirical grounds, citing such facts as:

- The highest fertility rates are in countries with the sparsest populations (for example, sub-Saharan Africa).
- Some of the world’s most “overcrowded” countries and cities have the highest per capita income levels and rates of economic growth (for example, Hong Kong, the Netherlands and New York).
- Rapid economic growth and fertility decline and high levels of contraceptive use can coexist with enormous income gaps and persistent poverty (for example, Brazil and the United States).

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<sup>10</sup> Bandarage 1997; de Barbieri 1994; Hartmann 1995; G. Sen 1994b.

- Some of the most environmentally polluted countries are those with severe population declines (for example, Poland, Russia and Ukraine).
- Fertility rates have decreased in most countries, while the continued growth of the world's population is due mainly to the simultaneous decline in mortality.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, economic growth itself plays a key role in environmental degradation (Harcourt 1994). More specifically, both environmentalists and feminists have pointed out that the worst source of global pollution is overconsumption by Northern, developed countries—an analysis accepted by government delegates in Copenhagen in 1995 and repeated many times in the Social Summit Declaration and Programme of Action. In other words, contrary to the old Malthusian logic that “fewer and better” children were the formula for prosperity, it would appear that the dominant path to modernity has meant more and more *things* in place of children; plenitude, not people, is the worst polluter.<sup>12</sup>

Growth-centred models of sustainable development, particularly in so far as they privilege macroeconomic indicators of output and official employment levels, also contain an inherent gender bias, for they leave out the (often unpaid) labour of women in households, communities and the informal sector. From a feminist standpoint, a key criterion of sustainability must be a policy's or an industry's *social* as well as environmental impacts—particularly including its impact on gender relations. Gita Sen, in reviewing three decades of population and development policies, predicts that “policies targeted at improving macroeconomic management or increasing gross national product growth while ignoring or worsening the incomes and livelihoods of the majority”—for example, through disinvestments in the social sector—are likely to fail. “In the longer term,” she says, “improving health and education, along with meeting other basic needs, raises the quality of a country's labour force, which is critical in determining the economy's growth potential and competitiveness”, besides helping to lower birth rates (1994b:68).<sup>13</sup> But these are also social justice issues. One has to ask, paraphrasing Spivak (1999): sustainability of and for what?

From the standpoint of transnational women's health movements seeking to empower women as reproductive, sexual and political actors, recent economic crises and retrenchments in public health services have indeed brought home that “macroeconomic policies can no longer be left off the table” (WEDO 1999:20). Feminists have condemned the ways that international financial institutions (IFIs), donor countries and developing country governments have allowed debt service, military expenditures and free-market priorities to override the desperate need for public investments in health care and other enabling conditions. Along with other groups, they have called for demilitarization, debt forgiveness and international regulation of unsustainable, unhealthy economic practices through such devices as a “Tobin Tax” on speculative capital flows. Women's health activists worldwide have sounded the alarm about the reproductive and other health threats of environmental toxins released by industries. They joined with protesters against the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle in late 1999 to oppose unfair trade practices (for example, unregulated drug prices and patents that prevent people with AIDS in Africa and Asia from receiving life-prolonging but economically unattainable medications). Such

<sup>11</sup> Bandarage 1997; A. Sen 1994; CWPE 1993; CNPD 1999; Mazur 1994; UNDP 1998.

<sup>12</sup> Amalric 1994; Mazur 1994; Mies and Shiva 1993.

<sup>13</sup> Sen's arguments here, of course, are prophetic, written five years before the economic crises of the late 1990s and the beginning of soul-searching by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) about whether their austerity regimes and SAPs of the previous years had gone too far.



links between health and economic development policies, between sustainability and human needs, are now acknowledged by the major international agencies responsible for health funding, especially the World Bank and the World Health Organization (WHO). But we do not hear from international policy makers that such needs are also inalienable and fundamental human rights that must take priority over profits.<sup>14</sup>

### ***Indivisibility of human rights and basic needs***<sup>15</sup>

At the March 1999 PrepCom meeting for the United Nations General Assembly Special Session's five-year review of ICPD (ICPD+5), the "pro-family" newspaper *Vivant!* published a feature article, replete with statistical data and graphics, condemning the "flawed human rights-based approach to health". Central to the article's attack was an argument embracing the discourse of "basic needs" as the ethically and socially superior framework to that of human rights. Associating safe water and nutrition with the "needs" approach and reproductive and sexual health with the "rights" approach, it alleged that "indiscriminate funding for ICPD's idealistically high standards of reproductive and sexual health *rights*" had caused "under funding and deterioration of more basic, practicable and affordable health *needs*". And it further insinuated that such "flawed" priorities represent the agendas of the West and its blatant disregard for the genuine needs and priorities of women in the South (Joseph 1999).<sup>16</sup>

On its face, to assert a *dichotomy* between rights and needs and then a hierarchy subordinating some health and bodily needs (especially those related to reproduction and sexuality) to others is inherently gender biased. As the Women's Coalition for ICPD wrote in its response to this attack:

Rights cannot be divorced from needs. Reproductive and sexual health and other basic human needs—education, sanitation, clean water, nutrition—are equally important and interdependent; *all* are human rights. Especially for women, good pre-natal and obstetric care, safe contraception, and other aspects of health are inseparable from such basic amenities as reliable transportation, hygienic conditions and clean water. At the same time, their rights to liberty, security of the person and development are unattainable without comprehensive, accessible and affordable reproductive and sexual health services and the freedom to make decisions about their fertility and sexuality.<sup>17</sup>

Underlying the "rights"/"needs" dichotomy is a basic fallacy. What it ignores is that rights are merely the codification of needs, reformulating them as ethical and legal norms and thus implying a duty on the part of those in power to provide all the means necessary to make sure those needs are met. This duty is affirmative as well as negative; that is, "states have an obligation not only to respect (to not do harm) but also to take positive measures to ensure [the enjoyment of rights]" (Copelon and Petchesky 1995:358). The

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<sup>14</sup> One exception in this regard is UNAIDS, established in 1996 as the joint arm of six UN agencies (WHO, UNICEF, UNDP, UNESCO, UNFPA and the World Bank) in charge of responding to the HIV/AIDS crisis globally. UNAIDS informs its work with a strong human rights perspective; see UNAIDS 1999.

<sup>15</sup> A longer version of this section was recently published as Petchesky 2000.

<sup>16</sup> The article prominently displays a photograph of a dark-skinned woman smiling happily as she gathers wheat in a field, with the caption: "Women in developing countries have a far greater need for nutrition, safe water, and other health services than for the 'reproductive' products and services treated as a priority by western nations." *Vivant!* was published daily during the ICPD+5 PrepCom by a group called the NGO Caucus for Stable Families, whose positions were very closely aligned to those of the Holy See (Vatican).

<sup>17</sup> The quote is from a leaflet, entitled *Reproductive Health and Rights are Human Rights*, distributed at ICPD. The leaflet can be obtained from the author or from HERA, c/o International Women's Health Coalition, 24 East 21<sup>st</sup> Street, New York, NY, 10010, USA, or via e-mail (hera@iwhc.org).

terminology of “human” and “universal” simply says that there should be no distinctions of class, gender, race, ethnicity, and so on; the rights belong to all persons and the duties to fulfil them to all authorities. Rights are meaningless, in other words, without needs. But needs cannot stand on their own as ethical principles either, because they lack any intrinsic methods for (i) determining whose and which needs should take precedence, (ii) assigning obligations to specific parties for fulfilling those needs and (iii) empowering those whose needs are at stake to speak for themselves. Without some principle of “personhood” or moral agency, which is only available through a human rights framework, there is nothing to prevent the state, medical experts or religious authorities from deciding what is good for me on the basis of political expediency, aggregate data or fundamentalist interpretations of scripture. Rights-bearers, on the other hand—who may be groups as well as individuals—are by definition those who are authorized to make official claims in defence of their own needs, now codified and formalized as rights.

This may seem to beg the question of whether some needs, and their corresponding rights, are more “basic” or “fundamental” than others; but my point is the logical interconnection between rights and needs and the indivisibility of different forms of rights, so that prioritizing makes no sense. We might visualize the different aspects of reproductive health rights as a series of concentric circles, beginning with the most intimate relations and radiating out to the most societal and even global (see box 14.1). Their overlaps become apparent when we look concretely at specific reproductive and sexual rights and the ways they cluster together with other rights in women’s everyday lives. For example, how can we imagine the right “to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of their children and to have the information and means to do so” (UNFPA 1995, para. 7.3) without jobs, resources or health insurance to pay for services, especially with the contraction of social benefits and increase in user fees? Women with their own jobs and incomes may still be dependent on a husband (if they have one) to get access to health insurance that will cover maternity care, since so many women work in marginal, informal or uninsured sectors (WEDO 1999). Nor does having adequate information and clinic services for contraception guarantee women freedom from domestic threats that put their well-being (or their marriage) in jeopardy if they dare to use those services.

A substantial literature documents the intersections between violence against women, both domestic and clinic-based, and threats or impairments to their reproductive health.<sup>18</sup> But the barriers to enjoyment of reproductive and sexual rights or the “highest attainable standard of health” may be more subtle. Studies show that women themselves, such as those active in the local government bodies in India known as *panchayats*, often comply with the hierarchy of priorities that puts road building before preventing reproductive tract infections. Many women tend to see their own health problems as somehow less important “when cost is an issue” or even as “natural” and inevitable, thus “seeking medical care too late or not at all” (Mukhopadhyay and Sivaramayya 1999:347; WEDO 1999:11).

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<sup>18</sup> See S. Fried 1994; Heise 1995; Heise et al. 1995; Weiss and Rao Gupta 1998; CRLP/CLADEM 1999.

**Box 14.1 The story of Futhi**

The following is an imaginary profile based on fact.

Futhi is one of the 18.5 million women worldwide, and one of the nearly 10.5 per cent of pregnant women using urban prenatal clinics in South Africa, who are infected by HIV. The roots of Futhi's infection start with marriage—a husband who works in the mines, is away a good deal and has unprotected sex with prostitutes. But there was never a question of leaving him, since she is unable to earn enough on her own to support her two children. Thanks to South Africa's progressive reproductive health policy, Futhi has access to a caring reproductive health clinic nearby. Yet, though she learned about condoms from the clinic nurse, she was afraid to suggest them to her husband for fear he would call her promiscuous and beat her. Besides, Zulu culture tells women to accommodate their husbands' desires. Then Futhi discovered she was pregnant and HIV+ and faced the dilemma of what to do. In South Africa abortion is a woman's right for any reason during the first trimester. Nurses at the prenatal clinic have warned her she cannot breastfeed the new baby without great risk of infecting it with HIV, and there is not yet safe drinking water in her township to use for bottle feeding. She has heard there are drugs that can prevent HIV transmission to the foetus, but these drugs—made by US-based pharmaceutical companies—are too expensive for the economically pressed South African government to buy on the world market. Faced with threats of punitive sanctions under existing patent treaties, the government has declined to seek or authorize local manufacture of cheaper versions. But even if the transnational drug companies lower their prices for African countries, the drugs will still probably cost too much for Futhi, and South Africa's inadequate health care system will lack the capacity to distribute them. So advanced drugs cannot protect Futhi's baby or assure her a longer life to care for her children. Apparently, abortion is her only "choice". Luckily, in South Africa at least, it is a choice.

**Sources:** Berer (1999); UNAIDS (1999); Weiss and Rao Gupta (1998); "South Africa", in WEDO (1999); Silverstein (1999); and McNeil Jr. (2000).

But do the very roots of such compliance and self-denial not involve issues that directly affect women's right to development? How can the right to development—usually classified in the "economic and social" category—be separated from the (social) right to education, the (political) right to participation in women's NGOs and the cultural changes necessary to nourish women's empowerment and self-worth? What about the women in Iran who suffer infertility, birth complications or stillbirths because of working since early childhood in the carpet-weaving industry and having underdeveloped pelvises (WEDO 1999)? If they could bring their case before the human rights treaty bodies, would they cite violations of their health rights, their reproductive rights, their right to education or their right not to be exploited by child labour practices or involuntary servitude? But of course, all these rights are relevant here, all are interconnected and all are grounded in basic needs. I would like to think as well that all should be understood as integral to what we mean when we speak not only of fundamental human rights but also of sustainable human development.

Feminists working in transnational movements have brought to the United Nations conferences and treaty bodies this synthetic perspective that refuses to separate rights from needs or to deny the personal, sexual and health aspects of sustainable development. In doing so, they have transformed the discourses of both social needs and human rights and begun to evolve effective strategies for translating those rights/needs into enforceable policies. But there is still a very long way to go and tremendous power structures blocking the way forward.

### **Assessing the UN Conferences: Gains and "Fault Lines"**

Efforts by transnational women's groups to concretize reproductive and sexual rights into practical policies and programmes have taken place at international, national and local levels. This section reviews the international work the women's coalitions carried out, and the forms of opposition they met, during the UN conferences of the 1990s. My aim will

be to assess both the strengths and the weaknesses of that activity, and the larger obstacles that still prevent women's movements from realizing their visions.

While the history of women's organizations lobbying the international community pre-dates the recent UN conferences by at least a century (Rupp 1997), their effectiveness and influence grew dramatically during the 1990s. Chen finds the roots of this influence in the previous United Nations Decade for Women conferences that culminated in Nairobi in 1985, with over 14,000 women from some 150 countries attending the NGO Forum. This historic moment—the first international women's conference held in Africa—marks the foundation of a truly “global women's movement” whose “leadership shifted perceptibly—although not entirely—from North to South.” (1996:142).<sup>19</sup> Silliman takes a more critical view of this process, aware of the hierarchies and imbalances that still prevail alongside coalition building and diversity. She makes an important distinction between NGOs and *social movements*, suggesting that the former tend to be service- and project-oriented within existing systems, while the latter pursue alternative visions to transform those systems (1999:156). I would put it somewhat differently by arguing that the relationship between NGOs and social movements is precisely what is at issue. In so far as NGOs maintain close ties and accountability to the social movements they usually grew out of, they can contribute significantly to transformative and oppositional projects.

Transnational women's NGOs working in the field of reproductive and sexual rights were already having a significant impact on international policy making prior to the Cairo conference in 1994. A decade of women's health movement activism directly or indirectly influenced a number of powerful institutions that set the agenda for international population programmes (for example, the Ford and MacArthur Foundations, the International Planned Parenthood Federation/IPPF and the Population Council). These institutions began to apply a gender perspective to their international funding, to incorporate feminist critiques into their research agendas and to hire staff and consultants who are knowledgeable in this perspective.

Precedents for the gains and shortcomings of the women's coalition in Cairo and Beijing were also set in the work of women's groups at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro (1992) and the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna (1993).

Women's groups participating in those meetings created a strategic process and methodology that would be applied in all the subsequent conferences: global, regional and national campaigns and international coalition-building meetings leading up to the conferences; mobilization of a Women's Caucus to draft alternative language and lobby government delegations; and liaison activity between the official conferences and PrepComs and the parallel NGO forums. Utilizing this strategy and their historic document, Women's Action Agenda 21, women's groups in Rio were able for the first time to put women's issues and concerns on the official agenda. Through their influence, the official Agenda 21 took some steps toward reframing the concept of sustainable development as one encompassing not only environmental protection but also the right to health, gender equality, reduction of military expenditures, alleviation of poverty and the concerns of women in all these areas (Chen 1996).

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<sup>19</sup> It was at the Nairobi conference, for example, that the DAWN network and UNIFEM (the United Nations Development Fund for Women) were formed.

The idea that “women’s rights are human rights” and that violence against women violates universal norms that supersede either “tradition” or national sovereignty was firmly established as a result of transnational women’s organizing prior to and during the Vienna Human Rights conference.<sup>20</sup> The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action and the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (adopted by the United Nations General Assembly the same year) express the consensus of governments that “gender-based violence and all forms of sexual harassment and exploitation” constitute violations of human rights. Their focus on women as subjects of human rights and women’s bodies as the objects of human rights violations was a vital step toward legitimating the discourses of reproductive and sexual rights developed in Cairo and Beijing. Vienna also provided the foundation for the international codification of crimes against women. Building on women’s insistence that the International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda prosecute sexual violence, the Women’s Caucus for Gender Justice won recognition of rape, sexual slavery, forced pregnancy, forced sterilization, trafficking and other sexual violence as crimes against humanity—and in some cases as war crimes or genocide—in the International Criminal Court treaty.<sup>21</sup>

The Women’s Caucus model worked successfully to influence the outcomes of all the 1990s UN conferences for two main reasons. First, it was well organized and had focused, knowledgeable leadership that provided strategic guidance and lobbying skills to women less familiar with the UN process.<sup>22</sup> Second, women’s NGOs have something the official delegations need and often lack: extensive knowledge and experience of the issues under debate. Nowhere is this truer than in the field of human rights, despite the political sensitivity of human rights issues. As Gaer demonstrates, “human rights NGOs [have been] the engine for virtually every advance made by the UN in the field of human rights since its founding” (1996:51). Women’s human rights groups in particular have been instrumental in supplying the human rights treaty bodies and international tribunals with cases, background information and clarification of norms and concepts, especially in regard to issues of violence against women. Likewise, population and development organizations, as well as government delegates, have depended on women’s NGOs to explain such concepts as “gender” and “reproductive health”. The prominence of women’s human rights and gender perspectives throughout the Cairo, Copenhagen and Beijing documents is a direct legacy of the work done by women’s caucuses in Rio and Vienna.

### ***Reassessing Cairo and Beijing***

Shortly after ICPD in Cairo, both its achievements and its limits from a women’s health perspective were evident. Clearly the transnational women’s coalition had succeeded in winning a real paradigm shift embodied in three aspects of the POA. First, the Cairo document moves firmly from an approach based on demographic targets and narrow family planning methods to a comprehensive reproductive health approach. Second, it integrates the principles of gender equality, equity and women’s empowerment into

<sup>20</sup> Bunch and Reilly 1994; Center for Women’s Global Leadership 1995; Chen 1996.

<sup>21</sup> See United Nations 1998:Arts. 6, 7 and 8; Women’s Caucus for Gender Justice 2000; and Copelon 2000.

<sup>22</sup> In Rio, organizational leadership was provided by the Women’s Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) and its president, the late Bella Abzug. In Vienna, the Center for Women’s Global Leadership (Rutgers University, United States) played a central role. In Cairo and Beijing, while WEDO continued to convene the large, public Women’s Caucus, the International Women’s Health Coalition (IWHC) mobilized a strategic network of lobbyists, NGO delegates and text-drafters who worked both behind the scenes and in the Women’s Caucus.

population and development strategies. Third, it explicitly recognizes reproductive rights, very broadly defined and linked to primary health care, as fundamental human rights (Germain and Kyte 1995). At the same time, however, the fault lines in the Cairo Programme threatened to block any real progress in transforming the noble rhetoric into actual policies and services. In addition to the weakness of sexual rights in the document and the continued absence of recognition for women's right to safe, legal abortion, these fault lines consisted of ICPD's failure to address macroeconomic inequities and the inability of prevailing neoliberal, market-oriented approaches to deliver reproductive and sexual health for the vast majority (Petchesky 1995a). To understand how these contradictions occurred in Cairo and persisted in Beijing and the ICPD+5 review process, it is necessary to analyse the opposing political forces that transnational women's groups confronted there.

### ***Fundamentalist perspectives***

Foremost in the field of players contesting reproductive and sexual rights is the cluster of ideological positions and their advocates I will call, for want of a more accurate term, "fundamentalist". Following a number of recent commentators, I take contemporary fundamentalisms to be political movements that cut across all major religions and geographical regions, although they typically use religious language and symbols as rhetorical tools. While their methods are pragmatic and political, their objectives are mainly conservative, in the sense of trying to restore a real or imagined past against the encroachments of a perceived external enemy (for example, imperialism, "Western decadence", "Satanism"). Central to this project is the restoration of a patriarchal form of family and authority, including the subordination of women to men and their confinement to traditional social roles, dress codes and norms of sexual behaviour.

During the Cairo PrepComs and conference in 1994 (and again in Beijing and during ICPD+5), a number of delegations representing Christian or Islamist varieties of fundamentalism joined together to oppose elements of the draft POA they claimed were offensive to their own traditions or laws. Often led by the Vatican (identified as the Holy See for United Nations purposes), this constituency took particular objection to any language in the document they interpreted to: (i) legitimate or facilitate abortion; (ii) give women or adolescents the possibility of making reproductive and sexual decisions independently of men or parents; (iii) condone "diverse forms of the family" (other than the patriarchal, heterosexual kind); and (iv) extend the concepts of reproductive and sexual health, reproductive rights or sexual rights to unmarried adolescents or gays and lesbians. As Freedman observes, the central problem sparking the opposition by fundamentalists to the ICPD POA "was not fertility regulation itself" but rather "the challenge to 'traditional' patriarchal social structures posed by the commitment to women's empowerment" (1996:66).

Freedman's point, although it neglects the homophobic dimension of fundamentalist views, is very important in clarifying that we are not in fact looking at "the historical pro-natalist versus anti-natalist controversy" here (DAWN 1999:8). To be sure, many fundamentalist groups oppose modern methods of contraception, especially for unmarried or childless married women. But some—for example, the Iranian government—actively promote such methods. The deeper object of their common hostility is what they would call a "Western feminist" or "individualist" philosophy of sexual and family relations, and most especially women's authority over sexual and reproductive decisions. Vatican spokesmen frame this position in the rhetoric of

“parental rights and responsibilities” and adherence to “family values”. Nonetheless, although women’s groups failed to gain explicit reference in the Cairo and Beijing documents to freedom of sexual orientation or sexual expression—or the actual term “sexual rights”—the ICPD POA embodies a sexual rights discourse. Thus “reproductive health” includes the ability “to have a satisfying and safe sex life” and “sexual health” involves “the enhancement of life and personal relations, and not merely [disease prevention]” (paragraph 7.2). Nowhere does the POA restrict these principles to heterosexual married adults. Rather, it acknowledges the need “to enable [adolescents] to deal in a positive and responsible way with their sexuality” and urges governments to provide adolescents with appropriate services and counselling with regard to reproductive health, “responsible sexual behaviour”, contraception and prevention of HIV/AIDS and other STDs (paragraphs 7.3 and 7.47). And the Beijing Platform goes even further toward defining a concept of sexual rights, when in paragraph 96 it says: “The human rights of women include their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination and violence”.

On the highly contentious issue of abortion, the transnational women’s movements gained some significant advances when one looks at the ICPD Programme and the Beijing Platform together. The greatly compromised paragraph 8.25 of the ICPD POA, on one hand, acknowledges that “unsafe abortion [is] a major public health concern” and, on the other, refuses to see abortion “as a method of family planning”.<sup>23</sup> Yet, even within its limitations, paragraph 8.25 urges governments to make all abortions safe where they are “not against the law” and to provide “access to quality services for the management of complications arising from [unsafe] abortion” in any circumstances. Such provisions have opened a wedge enabling women’s health activists in countries with restrictive abortion laws to win an expansion of safe, legal services (for example, in Bolivia and Brazil). Moreover, the Beijing Platform goes beyond Cairo in providing that governments should “consider reviewing laws containing punitive measures against women who have undergone illegal abortions” (paragraph 106k). Slowly and incrementally, women’s determination in all eras, countries and cultures to seek abortions, even at great risk to their lives and health, in order to gain some control over their fertility and bodies is starting to make an impact on international human rights standards (Petchesky 1990).

### **Populationist perspectives**

While less vocal than the fundamentalist contingents (whom they regard as enemies), population control organizations—whose principal aim is to disseminate contraceptives and reduce numbers among the world’s poor—were very much present in Cairo. These groups seemed content to let the women’s coalition do the work of directly confronting the fundamentalist opposition and crafting a “consensus” document that would resonate with new language, new ideas and (they hoped) renewed funding. But it would be a mistake to see mainstream population and family planning groups as in some way passive or outside the debates in Cairo. Their lingering (though, I would argue, waning) influence and unreconstructed ideology are evident in the contradictions within the

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<sup>23</sup> See Berer (1993), who points out the absurdity of this position, since preventing an unwanted birth (induced abortion) and preventing an unwanted pregnancy (contraception) obviously have the same end in view.

Cairo document between the rhetoric of reproductive and sexual health/rights and an approach to resources still focused on subsidized family planning and reliance on the market for everything else.

On its face the Cairo Programme appears to abandon the old neo-Malthusian numerical projections and panic about “population explosions”. The document’s text is refreshingly free of direct causal links between population growth and poverty, migration or environmental deterioration, adopting instead a complex, interactive approach to population issues. In regard to the enabling conditions for reproductive and sexual rights, the ICPD POA makes a significant advance beyond previous population conferences by directing governments to provide reproductive health services “through the primary health-care system” and to make these accessible “to all individuals of appropriate ages...no later than the year 2015” (paragraph 7.6). It urges that reproductive health services be “integrated” so that maternal health and prenatal care, gynaecological health, child health, family planning, programmes to improve women’s and children’s nutritional status, and programmes to prevent HIV infection and other STDs are fully coordinated (paragraphs 8.8 and 8.17). Above all, the text of the document, especially in chapters VII and VIII, abandons any notion of family planning, much less population control, as an end in itself. Instead it makes fertility simply one element within a broad framework governed by the principles of “informed free choice” and “equitable access to basic health care for all”, repudiating demographic targets, incentives and disincentives.<sup>24</sup> And in the context of equalizing life expectancy across countries and reducing infant, child and maternal mortality, chapter VIII urges governments to ensure improvements in structural conditions (for example, housing, clean water, workplace safety, and so on) that have an impact on health, especially that of vulnerable groups.

The Beijing Platform’s chapter on “Women and Health” improves upon the ICPD Programme in a number of respects. First, it embeds reproductive and sexual health/rights in the general principle of equality and non-discrimination and, specifically, in women’s human right to the highest standard of health (paragraph 92). Second, it fully adopts the reproductive health and rights provisions of the Cairo document but incorporates them into an overall health and environmental protection agenda instead of separating these into distinct chapters. Third, it introduces a number of concrete actions absent from the ICPD POA, such as programmes and services for prevention and early detection of breast, cervical and other gynaecological cancers, and programmes to ensure household and national food security (paragraphs 106–107). The attention both documents give to the larger physical and environmental context of health should be linked to their emphasis (chapter IV in the ICPD POA, and throughout the Beijing Platform) on creating gender equality and empowering women in all realms of social life—including education, work, politics, community development, household labour and decisions, and sexuality.

As feminist human rights advocates remind us, human rights are “evolving, not static”; they build on one another cumulatively and need to be seen as a whole (Copelon and Petchesky 1995:357). This means reading the Cairo, Copenhagen and Beijing documents—including Beijing’s improvements in regard to abortion access and sexual rights—as an interwoven fabric. When we do so, it would appear that international policies have moved very far indeed from a normative framework that privileges

<sup>24</sup> The principle of “basic health care for all” comes from the Alma Ata Declaration adopted by the International Conference on Primary Health Care in 1978.



populationist aims toward one in which gender justice and overall health and sustainable development take priority. But, while this is true with regard to the normative principles and goals of the ICPD POA, when we examine the sections devoted to *resources* and *implementation* a different picture emerges.

**Table 14.1: A feminist report card on the Cairo Programme of Action**

New achievements	Remaining gaps and challenges
Shift from population control to “reproductive rights and reproductive health” paradigm; comprehensive definition of reproductive health including sexual health, integrated with primary health services for all (chapter VII; paragraphs 7.2, 8.8).	Access to safe, legal abortion not recognized as part of reproductive health and rights; deference to national laws; where illegal, requirement of treatment for complications only (paragraph 8.25).
Definition of “reproductive rights” as part of “already recognized international human rights”; includes “the right to attain the highest standard of reproductive and sexual health”, “the means to do so”, “informed choice” and freedom from “discrimination, coercion and violence” (end to targets and incentives— paragraphs 7.3, 7.12, 7.22).	Reliance on private market mechanisms (cost-recovery schemes, user fees, health reform to assure “cost effectiveness”), increased involvement of private sector and deregulation, rather than measures for global macroeconomic restructuring, to generate resources and assure accountability (paragraphs 8.8, 13.22, 15.15, 15.18).
Recognition of adolescent rights to all reproductive and sexual health services, including “sexual education” and full protection against unwanted pregnancy, HIV/AIDS and other STDs (paragraphs 7.2, 7.37, 7.45, 7.47).	Ambiguous language about “the rights, duties and responsibilities of parents” could compromise right to confidentiality; inadequate resource allocations; absence of multisectoral integration (for example, health and education sectors).
“Gender Equality, Equity and Empowerment of Women” as a separate chapter; recognition of “the empowerment and autonomy of women and the improvement of their political, social, economic and health status” as “a highly important end in itself” (paragraph 4.1).	No resource allocations or specified amounts for any aspect of sustainable development, primary health care, women’s empowerment and improved status, poverty alleviation or environment (chapter XIII).
Recognition of all forms of violence against women, including FGM, and measures to end them as integral to reproductive health (paragraphs 4.4, 4.9, 4.22, 4.23, 7.3, 7.6, 7.17).	Treatment of “women” as a unitary category; failure to recognize racial, ethnic and class divisions in access to resources and services and health risks (except HIV/AIDS).
Shared male responsibility for childcare, housework and reproductive and sexual health as essential to gender equality (chapter IV-C).	No concrete strategies for implementation, no resource allocations.
Encouragement of governments to expand and strengthen “grassroots, community-based and activist groups for women” (paragraph 4.12).	No resource allocations or specified targets.
Recognition of the “diversity of family forms”, including female-headed households, and the need for government policies to benefit all, especially the most vulnerable (paragraphs 5.1, 5.2).	Failure to expressly recognize affirmative sexual rights along with reproductive rights, including right to diversity of sexual expression and orientation.
Definition of reproductive health services as integrating not only family planning but also prenatal and obstetric care, infertility treatment, prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS, STDs and gynaecological cancers (paragraphs 7.6, 8.8).	Specification of precise money target (US\$17 billion) but <i>imbalance</i> in resource allocations: twice as much specified for “family planning component” as for all of “reproductive health component” put together (paragraphs 13.14–13.15).
Target date of 2015 for reproductive health services, increasing life expectancy, reducing infant and child mortality, and reducing maternal mortality (paragraphs 7.6, 7.16, 8.5, 8.16, 8.21).	Inadequate allocation of resources to reproductive health component; no resources directed to necessary infrastructure, poverty alleviation and enabling conditions.

In spite of all the language relegating family planning to a broader reproductive and primary health agenda, when it comes to actual allocations of resources the “family planning component” (that is, distribution of contraceptives) still receives the lion’s share

(see table 14.1). Indeed, family planning is projected as costing nearly twice as much in 2015 as all of reproductive health, maternal and child health, gynaecological health, prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS and other STDs, and adolescent reproductive and sexual health and education combined (paragraphs 13.14–13.15). Admittedly, the ICPD POA is the only conference document that sets a precise money target (\$17 billion in 2000 and increasing amounts in subsequent years)—a positive step in principle. But the fact that this is the only area in which the financial calculations of “experts” are accepted seems more a victory for the population establishment than for women’s health movements. As for primary health care, emergency services, education, sanitation, water, housing and all the other aspects of the “development” side of ICPD—much less any programmes for women’s empowerment—these are dismissed with the gratuitous comment that “additional resources will be needed” (paragraphs 13.17–13.18).

Even more troubling is the ICPD’s overall approach to implementation and enforcement. While the chapter on health recognizes the devastating impact that SAPs, “public-sector retrenchment” and “the transition to market economies” have had on health indicators, especially among the poor, the implementation chapters revert to the market-oriented policies that have actually widened income gaps and mortality and morbidity gaps globally and within countries. In order to improve “cost effectiveness,” “cost recovery” and quality of services, governments are urged to reintroduce user fees and social marketing schemes; “promote the role of the private sector in service delivery and in the production and distribution...of high-quality reproductive health and family-planning commodities”; and “review legal, regulatory and import policies...that unnecessarily prevent or restrict the greater involvement of the private sector” (paragraphs 13.22, 15.15 and 15.18). There is a cautionary word about providing adequate “safety nets”, but no indication of their scope or duration. Nor does the ICPD POA anywhere address the need for multisectoral approaches at the national level, so that health, population and development ministries do not continue to function as separate, competing entities. In sum, “development” in the ICPD framework remains stuck within free-market capitalist priorities.

This prevalence of a market-oriented perspective in the POA occurred by default more than by plan; that perspective is unquestioned dogma among the major donor governments—particularly the United States and the European Union (EU)—and the IFIs. Their presence in the ICPD-related meetings may have intimidated any very outspoken opposition among the “Group of 77” (G-77) countries,<sup>25</sup> who are desperately seeking foreign investments and debt relief.

The fundamentalist contingents, despite all their rhetoric about “basic needs”, were too preoccupied with opposing the reproductive and sexual rights language to have taken an outspoken position on the macroeconomic issues. As for the Women’s Caucus, its position on these questions was also contradictory in practice. On one hand, the Caucus proposed language strongly criticizing SAPs and their adverse impact on women. On the other hand, its members were reluctant to push the United States and the European Union too hard on the resource questions because it needed those delegations as allies on reproductive and sexual health and rights. Among the civil society participants in Cairo, only the population and family planning groups had an unequivocal interest in

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<sup>25</sup> The G-77 “is an intergovernmental group established in 1964 to represent the interests of developing countries in the United Nations” (UNIFEM 1995). Today it consists of nearly 150 member states that differ vastly in culture, economic conditions, internal politics and power position both within the UN and in the global arena.

accommodating the neoliberal agenda and placating the Northern donors, in hopes of increasing their own funds.

To understand the quiet but critical role of population and family planning groups in abetting this agenda, it needs to be underlined that achieving social equality and the redistribution of wealth has never been their concern. Throughout its history, the international population establishment (aided by academic demographers) has relentlessly pursued the aim it took on from its origins during the Cold War: "to reduce Third World population growth through the diffusion of contraceptive technology".<sup>26</sup> Many of these organizations, including UNFPA, have become much more sophisticated in their methods for achieving this aim, having been persuaded by massive research evidence that coercion and mistreatment too often drive women away from clinics while education and jobs motivate them to have fewer children—hence their embrace of feminist concepts. But while this "feminization" of the populationist rhetoric is sincere, it is also opportunistic. On a purely strategic level, population and family planning organizations needed the expertise, commitment and ideas of the women's coalition throughout the ICPD process to act as a buttress against the fundamentalists; thus they pursued a marriage of convenience. But the primary interest of these groups is to rationalize their own existence and increase their budgets; for if family planning is just one part of reproductive health care, which is part of primary health care, one might ask what the rationale is for separate "population" programmes at all.

Given the right-wing Congressional blocks to US funding for international family planning and population programmes, it would seem UNFPA and US-based population organizations are reluctant to give up the one card they still believe can justify their activities before the US Congress: popular fears of "overpopulation" and the view that population growth in developing countries is a "security threat" to US interests (Hartmann 1999). Even as its own population growth projections decline year after year, UNFPA continues to preface its most recent publications and media statements with figures projecting how many billions will inhabit Earth, especially in developing countries, and correlating these with environmental and social disaster. UNFPA's commitment to the reproductive health and rights-based approach of Cairo is no doubt real, but it is seen primarily as a *means* "to slow population growth", "to accelerate economic growth" and "to reduce potential environmental damage" rather than a matter of basic human rights (UNFPA 1997a, 1999). The sacred cows it never wants to challenge are those of economic growth and free markets.<sup>27</sup>

Much more tenacious and doctrinaire in their population control aims are US-based population and environmental groups such as Population Action International (PAI) and the National Audubon Society. In a flyer produced for the ICPD+5 review, the Audubon Society falsely defines the "consensus" reached in Cairo in crude neo-Malthusian terms: "the need and the means to slow population growth and eventually stabilize human numbers". PAI, in a 1997 booklet directly addressed to the World Bank and its post-Cairo funding policies, berates the Bank for having given "limited attention...to the problem of rapid population growth in the last few years", sweeping population issues "narrowly under the health sector", and redirecting its loans and research efforts toward health and education rather than family planning (Conly and Epp 1997).

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<sup>26</sup> Freedman 1996:65; Greenhalgh 1996; de Barbieri 1994.

<sup>27</sup> A striking exception is the 1997 report titled *The Right to Choose: Reproductive Rights and Reproductive Health*, which is grounded in a strong human rights and gender equality framework (see UNFPA 1997b).

If population interests are accusing the World Bank of abandoning a population control agenda in favour of women's health and education, then the women's and development NGOs must have been doing something right in Cairo, Copenhagen and Beijing. Yet the fault lines in the Cairo Programme, its unbalanced resource allocations and its assumption that equitable population policies based on people's health and social needs are compatible with market-driven economic policies remain extremely troubling. They recall the criticisms by certain feminist groups who attended the ICPD's NGO Forum but remained distrustful of not only the official conference but also the Women's Caucus. These groups charged that the whole ICPD process was an exercise in co-optation; that it used the language of reproductive health and rights to legitimate old-style population control with a feminist face; and that, given the population establishment's historical record, any population policy can never be compatible with feminist values and goals.<sup>28</sup>

### **Feminist counterpoints**

While mainstream organizations like PAI and the National Audubon Society fuel these charges, I would respond with three points in defence of the Women's Caucus in Cairo. First, there is no logical necessity for population policies to be elitist, reductionist or aimed only at reducing numbers (especially among the poor, migrants and people of colour). Demography, after all, is a science dealing not only with fertility and numbers but with how people (populations) are distributed across age cohorts, genders, ethnic groups and geographic areas; their marriage, employment and cohabitation patterns; their deaths and diseases; as well as their access to goods, land and services. Given a different kind of vision, demographers and population planners could just as well apply their tools to identifying and eliminating inequities in these patterns of distribution, whether it be in treatment for HIV/AIDS or in access to liveable housing.<sup>29</sup>

Second, women's movements have influenced not only the research methods and concerns of mainstream population organizations but also their allocation of resources and service delivery programmes in countries around the world. An important example is the work of IPPF in its Western Hemisphere (Latin America and the Caribbean) and South Asian regions, where gender perspectives, quality of care, and most recently women's empowerment and development, have become the major indices of successful programming. In reproductive health projects run by IPPF's affiliate, the Family Planning Association of India (FPAI), in Maharashtra state, for instance, project personnel say they never speak of "family planning" but rather try to "empower the women in the *mahila mandals* (local women's organizations) to think, express themselves, take decisions and act". Through a variety of skills training programmes, these projects have resulted in a dramatic rise in women's age at marriage, in their literacy rates and in their contraceptive use. Similar projects in Madhya Pradesh report that now "94% of project clients are opting for temporary contraceptive methods (mainly the condom) in an area where the traditional emphasis has been on sterilization" (IPPF 1999:14).

What makes IPPF, by any criteria a Northern-based, "mainstream" and powerful international family planning organization, different from PAI? To understand how IPPF priorities in some regions began to change, we need to look at the internal dynamics that

<sup>28</sup> They included the Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights, UBINIG (Bangladesh), ANTIGENA (Switzerland), the Committee on Women, Population and the Environment (United States) and the Third World Network. See Isis International 1993 for their statements, as well as Hartmann 1994; WGNRR 1993; and Silliman 1999.

<sup>29</sup> This argument was first made by Marge Berer in 1990 (see Berer 1990, 1993).

link significant parts of that organization to women's movements on the outside.<sup>30</sup> In a valuable new case study, Adriana Ortiz-Ortega and Judith Helzner (1999) attribute a decade of change in IPPF policies to the following factors: (i) the momentum of the feminist movement in the mid- to late-1980s; (ii) the appointment of in-house feminists in key staff and board positions; and (iii) the building of close alliances with women's health networks and movements outside the organization.<sup>31</sup> The experience of IPPF suggests two important conclusions. First, feminists working within mainstream institutions *can* help to change policies and programmes in ways that directly benefit the lives of the most marginalized people—if their work is constantly informed by connections to grassroots and transnational women's movements. Progressive work within institutions and independent movements outside those institutions are *both* crucial to social change and reinforce one another. Second, mainstream population and family planning organizations are no more monolithic than are women's NGOs. Some cling to their neo-Malthusian convictions, while others are responding to feminist ideas and practices and attempting to incorporate them into their programmes and direct services.

### ***Learning from the fault lines: Women in the Social Summit and ICPD+5***

My final point in defence of the Women's Caucus is best illustrated in the lessons transnational feminist groups have learned about (i) how to work most effectively within the UN system, and (ii) the importance of challenging global power arrangements. Feminist critics of lobbying UN conferences argue that, despite many gains achieved, "by choosing the United Nations conferences as a site for NGO organizing, women's NGOs had to operate within the framework set by the United Nations and government representatives" and thus found themselves "straitjacketed" if not muzzled. These critics also question "using limited resources to respond to an agenda set by governments and UN agencies rather than using their resources to work for change outside of these international structures" (Silliman 1999:151; Keyzers 1999:17). Certainly, legitimate questions can be raised about the costs as well as benefits (both human and material) of women's NGOs becoming involved in "UN-level diplomacy", just as they can with regard to lobbying and electoral politics at the national or local levels. But women's work for social change has to occur *both* within and outside established institutions, *and* in global, national and grassroots contexts simultaneously. Far from competing, these different levels and forms of work are, or should be, mutually reinforcing. Rather than "mainstreaming the women's movements and strait-jacketing women's activism", the very process of participating in the conferences sharpened the strategic abilities and broadened the political understanding of many women's groups from North and South.

As this analysis has tried to show, transnational women's movements working within the UN conferences were contending with hostile forces on all sides, in addition to coping with an alien system of rigid rules and procedures. In such a situation,

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<sup>30</sup> My argument here is not meant to suggest a "revolution" at the international policy level of IPPF but rather to emphasize the process by which progressive change begins within institutions. Not only did IPPF's international office recently dissolve its Gender Advisory Panel, relegating gender to a lowly "task force" but it also has yet to commit general funds to the kinds of empowerment projects I describe here, which still depend largely on outside grants. In other words, a feminist transformation in IPPF's mission is far from having become *institutionalized*. (Many thanks to Judith Helzner for these insights.)

<sup>31</sup> In the Western Hemisphere Region, the principal liaison group was the Latin American and Caribbean Women's Health Network. IPPF in South Asia maintains similar relations with local and national women's groups, which are very strong and well organized in that region.

compromises and unholy alliances are hard to avoid. If the Women's Caucus can be accused of anything, it would be to have diverted disproportionate energy toward combating the fundamentalist and nationalist opponents of reproductive and sexual rights and less toward assuring the structural and macroeconomic conditions for those rights. This concentration of energies meant forming alliances with larger, more established NGOs, who "tend to take [fewer] risks or politically costly positions and are more amenable to conciliation and compromise" (Silliman 1999:149). At the same time, beginning with the Beijing preparatory process women's NGOs began facing a well-organized backlash in the name of national sovereignty and traditional morality, fomented by the Vatican and some of its government allies. This backlash entailed "restrictions on NGO access and accreditation" to the official conferences, "mostly closed-door negotiations" and an overwhelming resort to "brackets" or filibustering tactics to avoid consensus over particularly contentious texts and stall or even sabotage any final document (Chen 1996:152). In other words, the very success of women's NGOs in inserting feminist ideas into the ICPD POA aroused an intense reaction.

Such a backlash with regard to reproductive and sexual rights had already appeared in Copenhagen in March of 1995. The World Summit for Social Development (WSSD) Programme of Action in some ways reflects Cairo in reverse. Its holistic framework, integrating sustainable development, poverty eradication, health, education, human rights, gender and racial equality, infuses the entire document instead of being concentrated within certain chapters. The "Principles and Goals" section declares the empowerment of people, "particularly women", to be "a main objective of development and its principal resource". It affirms the urgency of women's full participation in all spheres and levels of social, political and economic life and their "access to all resources needed for the full exercise of their fundamental rights". Chapter IV on "Social Integration" elaborates on these principles, linking them to a concept of pluralism and diversity in societies and inclusion of all vulnerable and marginalized groups. And yet the Social Summit document virtually ignores not only sexuality and sexual orientation but also the definition of reproductive and sexual health and choice as fundamental human rights. It incorporates "full access to preventive and curative health care", especially for women and children, into its programmes for poverty eradication and social integration. But, deferring to the Vatican position, it qualifies every mention of such access with the notion of "parental rights and responsibilities", avoiding any reference to reproductive or sexual rights (paragraphs 35-c, 36-h and 74-g).<sup>32</sup> The items listed as necessary "to meet the basic needs of all" are broad and comprehensive. But sexuality is nowhere among them, and the document's repeated commitment to a human rights approach is strangely silent throughout the section on "basic human needs" (chapter II-C).

In part these omissions reflect a practical reality: the stronger presence of Vatican forces in Copenhagen relative to that of women's reproductive rights groups, who (with infinitely fewer human and financial resources) could not manage travelling to Copenhagen in the few months between Cairo and Beijing. At the same time, behind this reality lurks a set of priorities in which the major funding agencies that support global feminist advocacy (and are located mostly in the North) do not put social development high on their agenda, and many feminist-identified organizations themselves

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<sup>32</sup> The amendments to the draft Declaration and POA proposed by the Women's Caucus had inserted strong and consistent language reaffirming Cairo and calling for promotion of women's sexual and reproductive rights, but these proposals were virtually ignored in the final version of the WSSD document.

still do not think of social development or macroeconomic issues and “women’s issues” in the same breath. While a central argument of this paper is that such bifurcated thinking among transnational women’s groups is gradually changing, it is not changing rapidly enough—in part because the fundamentalist challenge takes centre stage.

A fundamentalist, anti-feminist backlash was also highly visible during the ICPD+5 negotiations at United Nations headquarters in New York in 1999. Under the leadership of HERA (Health, Empowerment, Rights and Accountability)—a transnational network of women’s health activists who had served as core lobbyists and NGO members of government delegations in Cairo and Beijing—the “Women’s Coalition for ICPD” mobilized over 100 organizations from both the South and the North in a strategic process very similar to that applied at the prior UN meetings. In a scenario that was familiar but intensified relative to the 1994–1995 conferences, the coalition had to contend with two main problems: (i) a Vatican/fundamentalist strategy that was not only highly organized but much more focused on a few key issues; and (ii) a decision by the G-77 countries to function throughout these meetings as a bloc with a single spokesperson. This latter tactic not only created a formidable mechanism for delaying the proceedings endlessly (since the G-77 could never agree on anything). It also “straitjacketed” a number of G-77 delegations whose domestic policies are more in the spirit of Cairo than were their positions at the United Nations. A third problem was that many government delegates were local mission bureaucrats rather than seasoned experts who might be expected to know something about ICPD and have experience in its implementation. Women’s coalition members soon began to realize they were lobbying among people who had not even been in Cairo, had never read the POA, and did not know the difference between reviewing practical actions to implement a document and redrafting that document all over again. But of course these dynamics were really indications of the low level of governments’ commitment to the review process and their growing resentment of NGO activity at the United Nations. Quite arguably, the work of the Women’s NGO Coalition at these meetings was pivotal to sustaining momentum; without it, no final report would have been produced at all.

And yet a consensus document did finally emerge, one that holds the line on the major reproductive and sexual health/rights provisions of the Cairo POA and, in a few instances, goes beyond them. For example, delegates adopted a new provision advanced by the Women’s Coalition regarding the training of health service providers to ensure that abortion, where legal, “is safe and accessible” (paragraph 63-iii). Given the frequent absence of such training and access, even in countries such as the United States where abortion is a legal right, this provision has great practical importance. Moreover, by the end of the ICPD+5 process, it was clear that “sexual rights” had become an official part of the international human rights lexicon, regardless of the absence of the actual words in any document. This achievement at the level of language, the result of persistent efforts by women’s health and human rights NGOs, is more than a symbolic victory. A compilation of the work of the five UN human rights treaty bodies relevant to reproductive and sexual health indicates numerous instances since the Cairo and Beijing conferences in which the human rights committees have cited countries for their failure to prevent sexual and other forms of violence against women; or to provide sex education,

sexual and HIV/AIDS counselling for men and women, or more funds for sexual health services (Stanchieri et al. 1999).<sup>33</sup>

Far from being “silenced” in the 1999 meetings, Women’s Coalition members worked in many resourceful ways to make their presence and ideas felt—through press conferences, flyers, hallway demonstrations and an effective alliance with the newly organized Youth Coalition. In fact, I would argue that by 1999 women’s transnational NGOs had become far more sophisticated than they were in 1994 about the need for effective strategies to address the *structures of power* underlying existing patterns of global governance. One example of such a strategy is the vigorous international petition campaign (“See Change”) launched by Catholics for a Free Choice (CFFC) during ICPD+5 to challenge the Vatican’s status as a “non-member state permanent observer” at the United Nations (CFFC 1999). The increasing attention of women’s health activists to the larger structures of power at the global level also extends to the macroeconomic conditions of reproductive and sexual rights—the “fault lines” of Cairo. In the years between Cairo and ICPD+5, transnational women’s NGOs working in the health sector became more committed to repairing those fault lines and to confronting directly the problems of privatization, unregulated global capital flows, inequitable trade patterns and the resulting shrinkage of social resources to meet health needs. In its proposed amendments to the “Key Actions” report, the Women’s Coalition thus recommended insertion of a paragraph addressing these macroeconomic issues and concerns. It further proposed amending the draft document’s existing language in the “Resources” section advocating “selective use of user fees, social marketing, cost-sharing and other forms of cost recovery” to assure “access to services by the poor, especially women”. And in addition to debt cancellation and debt swaps (to which all parties agreed), the Coalition’s proposals included “*additional mechanisms to raise resources such as taxes on financial transactions at the global and national level whose proceeds would be earmarked for human development programmes including sexual and reproductive health*”.

The final document passed by the UN General Assembly adopted none of these suggestions, nor did the G-77 countries seriously consider them. Instead, the “post-Cairo consensus” relies on appeals once again to donor countries and organizations to increase their contributions to official development assistance (ODA) earmarked for health care, education, poverty eradication and women’s empowerment; to enact measures to relieve the debt burden of poor countries; and to build in “adequate social safety net measures to promote access to services” by those who might be excluded (paragraphs 95, 100 and 105).<sup>34</sup> In addition, the document calls on the private sector (now universally acknowledged as playing a central role in providing health services and commodities) to “ensure that its services and commodities are of high quality and meet internationally accepted standards; that its activities are conducted in a socially responsible, culturally sensitive, acceptable and cost-effective manner;...that it adheres to basic rights recognized by the international community and recalled in the Programme of Action” (paragraph 86). Of course, no international mechanisms yet exist to enforce such standards and obligations on the part of the “private sector,” except to rely on the good faith of TNCs

<sup>33</sup> The major human rights treaty bodies at the United Nations are the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination; the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women; the Committee on the Rights of the Child; and the Human Rights Committee.

<sup>34</sup> The very concept of a “safety net” is problematic because of its vagueness; nowhere does it specify basic minimums that must be met, as a *matter of human rights*, nor by when or for which groups.



and the political will of governments. Nor are the private sector or the international financial institutions in any way a party to the UN conference documents or human rights conventions or subject to their (morally if not legally binding) jurisdiction.

It is interesting to look back in time to the Social Summit in 1995, where various participants came closer than they have in any UN conference before or since in trying to challenge these basic structural gaps in “global governance”. One of the most visionary was the Women’s Caucus, whose far-reaching amendments for the draft Declaration and POA opposed the prevailing market-driven policies by proposing, among other things, to:

- Replace the document’s emphasis on “[promoting] dynamic, open, free markets” with an emphasis on “[regulating] markets in the public interest with a view to reducing inequality, preventing instability, expanding employment, increasing the security of employment and establishing a socially acceptable minimum wage” (Commitment 1).
- Establish the basis for international trade equity through “effective regulations for the trade and investment activities of transnational corporations” (Commitment 1).
- “Initiate the foundation of a global fund for human security that would serve as a compensation mechanism for the social insecurity that results from the instability of the international market...financed by a levy on the commercial exchanges [of] international private financiers” (Commitment 1).
- Require the IFIs and WTO “to promote universally accepted standards of economic and social rights”; to comply with and further international human rights commitments...specifically commitments to women’s equality”; and “to report to the human rights treaty bodies” (Commitment 8 and Chapter V).
- Generate new financial resources through “new forms of taxation that will promote sustainable social and economic development such as placing taxes on resource use, commodification of common resources, taxes to discourage the production of toxic products, taxes on international financial speculative transactions” [Tobin Tax] (Chapter V).<sup>35</sup>

Above all, the Women’s Caucus amendments to the Social Summit POA contain the design for an elaborate machinery that would make the IMF, the World Bank and the WTO, as well as governments and transnational corporations, accountable to both the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the human rights treaty bodies for upholding international standards of human rights, poverty elimination, gender equality and trade equity. In addition, this machinery would include: (i) a new juridical assembly able to hear cases and apply sanctions for non-compliance; (ii) regular mechanisms for monitoring and correcting the impact of SAPs on women and poverty levels; and (iii) an “elected international assembly of representatives of social groups to meet in conjunction with governments under the existing General Assembly as a component of a new system of global governance”—thereby *institutionalizing* and *democratizing* NGO participation in the UN system. Utopian no doubt, but by 1995 transnational women’s coalitions were well aware that the international political and economic system would have to be turned upside down in order to achieve a healthy world.

Once again, the official document finally accepted by government delegations, reflecting the actual balance of power in the world as it is, ignored most of these recommendations. Instead, despite its many progressive, feminist aims, when it comes to resources, implementation and follow-up the Social Summit Declaration and POA, like the ICPD POA, makes numerous concessions to the prevailing neoliberal, market-

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<sup>35</sup> Many of these recommendations are similar to ones contained in “The Copenhagen Alternative Declaration” (8 March 1995), a document emanating from the work of the NGO Development Caucus.

oriented doctrine. In chapter I describing “An Enabling Environment for Social Development,” the approach to markets is primarily one of promoting their openness (“free trade”) rather than regulating their adverse effects. While SAPs are urged to “include social development goals” and “give priority to human resource development”, they should also “establish a more favourable climate for trade and investment” (Commitment 7). Nowhere are any economic principles framed in concepts such as social solidarity or social rights, nor is there a trace of the redistributive language of the Women’s Caucus amendments. As for strategies to increase resources for social development, these rely mainly on the 0.7 per cent of ODA commitment of donor countries, “20/20” agreements between donor and recipient countries, and debt reduction or cancellation (chapter V). But the Social Summit POA depends largely for the enforcement of these strategies on the good will of governments and IFIs. In sharp contrast to the Women’s Caucus and transnational development NGOs, it outlines no new or reformed institutional mechanisms, much less mechanisms that include democratic participation by members of international civil society, to ensure that IFIs, TNCs and governments are held accountable for their policies and practices.

Critics have charged that the UN conferences of the 1990s—which, after all, produced documents that are not only flawed but have no binding legal force—amounted to a tremendous waste of resources and energy. Even if the original documents themselves are worthy statements of principle, the UN system and UN diplomats are poorly equipped to engage in a meaningful process of monitoring and reviewing their implementation at the national level.<sup>36</sup> As O’Neil writes, “States sign these agreements in response to pressure from domestic women’s groups as well as out of concern for their international reputation”. Their compliance through concrete legislation and policy, however, will mostly depend on “women’s strong presence in government” and/or the will and positioning of women’s NGOs to demand, or carry out, the implementation and monitoring process themselves (O’Neil 1995:62, 69). Silliman goes further, arguing that “changes made at the international conference level are not structural” and, being non-binding, “do not effect changes on a domestic level”. Moreover, she asserts, “working to ‘monitor’ the promises made at UN conferences...often deflects NGO energies and sucks them into the orbit of governments and international lending agencies, where their impact is marginal and where too often their politics are compromised” (Silliman 1999:152).

Certainly the outcomes of the Social Summit and the ICPD+5 processes I have just analysed give depressing confirmation that the conferences do not fundamentally challenge global structures of power. The market values and privatization that dominate the thinking of the IFIs, TNCs and major donor countries have also captured that of most Southern governments and seriously compromise the normative principles that the women’s caucuses won. Nonetheless, I would argue that participation in the UN conferences has been a critical vehicle for strengthening and broadening transnational women’s coalitions. More importantly, it has raised their awareness about the macroeconomic priorities of global institutions and just how much remains to be done in

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<sup>36</sup> Such concerns were publicly expressed in an open letter to United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan signed by a large and varied group of NGOs that had participated in the ICPD+5 process. Transmitted at the closing of the UN General Assembly Special Session in early July 1999, the letter asked the Secretary-General to “actively reconsider the process by which the implementation of important UN conferences [is] reviewed and appraised”. It complained that, in the case of the ICPD, the review process had been diverted into “a reassessment of the fundamentals” already “agreed and firmly established in Cairo”; that “procedures [had prevailed] over substance”; and that “scarce human and financial resources of the UN, governments and also of civil society” had been “wasted” as a result.

order to change those priorities. The following section will examine the impact of the conference documents at the national level and how the work of monitoring their implementation (indeed, left largely to women) has affected NGOs. Without the documents, however, and the transformative feminist values they contain despite their weaknesses, and because of women's efforts, there would be little to hold governments accountable for.

### **Implementing International Norms at the National Level: The Many Faces of Privatization**

As events during the 1990s United Nations conferences suggest, major shifts and power struggles are taking place in the global politics of health. I would argue that the current centre of gravity in dominant population and development strategies has moved away from the outmoded methods of population controllers to more complex and sophisticated objectives. These objectives are not primarily concerned with reducing numbers or disseminating contraceptives but rather with restructuring systems of financing and delivery, and opening up markets in what used to be the public sector to facilitate private investment, cost effectiveness and growth. Their main command centres are located among health and development economists at the World Bank rather than demographers at UNFPA or international population organizations like PAI, and their approach to health reform dovetails with what we might call the *revisionist neoliberal approach* to macroeconomic policies: free markets stabilized by moderate (and globally centralized) regulations; and privatization softened by minimal (and locally decentralized) "safety nets" for the very poorest. It is an approach that presents feminist movements with a more complicated scenario than that of populationist and medical abuses of women's bodies and personhood. For, through the agency of international donors, it often seeks to empower women's NGOs both as international actors, and as monitors and service providers within countries, while it may disempower states from providing the services that women's NGOs are attempting to improve and expand or restore.

Health sector reform (see box 14.2) is the rubric that encapsulates the major international and national policy initiatives that will affect reproductive and sexual rights and health in the next decade, and globalization is the larger context in which health sector reform is taking place. *Privatization* in this scenario has meant the downsizing by the state of its public welfare functions so it can become a conduit for the transnational flow of capital and goods, along with the increasing absorption of those functions by private (often commercial) interests. In turn this typically means *commodification* of health care and other basic services, which then become available only for a fee. Among the well-known adverse effects of these trends, especially (but not exclusively) in developing countries, are the reduction of public sector programmes, on which working people and people in poverty depend; rising unemployment; the inability of the state even to provide "safety nets" any longer, due to the shrinkage of public revenues; and increasing poverty and gaps between rich and poor. Privatization itself directly contributes to poverty: "In India, the increased cost of medical care is the second most common cause of rural indebtedness" (WEDO 1999:11). And, of course, all this is compounded by huge burdens of national debt.

**Box 14.2: Health sector reform (HSR)**

Feminist economist Hilary Standing defines health sector reform (HSR) “as an amalgamation of the economic efficiency and public sector/good governance international agendas. Elements of it, particularly those concerned with controlling health sector expenditure, relate to economic crisis and structural adjustment policies. Other elements, particularly those connected to public sector and institutional reform, are related to governance issues and the role of the state as the overall regulatory body (Standing 1999:1).

During the 1990s HSR—formerly the province of health economists and technocrats—caught the attention of governments and NGOs interested in health policy. Standing emphasizes that national and international efforts to address crises in the financing and delivery of health care have taken different forms in different geographical contexts. Thus, in Latin America, where both state agencies and civil society organizations, particularly women’s health groups, are relatively strong, it has emphasized decentralization, reform of social security systems, and a major role for both the private sector and NGOs. In sub-Saharan Africa, where countries are heavily donor-dependent, face “severe crisis in health sector budgets” and have “weak state capacity to manage and regulate the health sector,” the emphasis has been on “financing mechanisms and improvement of human resource management” (1999:16). Despite regional and national variations, several common elements seem to emerge:

- defining more cost-effective financial schemes (the favourite being basic packages of essential services) and more efficient management techniques;
- devolving management and service provision (as opposed to overall policy and allocations) to district and local levels, that is, decentralization;
- developing new health financing and cost-recovery options, for example, user fees, community financing schemes, insurance and vouchers.
- Reforming the human resource component, for example through reducing personnel and/or monitoring performance.
- Involving the “private sector”—including non-profit NGOs as well as businesses and private practitioner groups—more fully in service management and delivery (for example through sub-contracting) (Standing 1999:8–10).

In theory, there is no reason why the criteria of efficiency and cost effectiveness should be incompatible with either better health outcomes or the goals of equity and human rights; indeed, inefficient and wasteful health systems can hardly be socially just. Moreover, some HSR advocates surely have distributive justice in mind—for example, challenging governments to finance primary health care rather than tertiary care hospitals. Overall, however, feminist observers have found the most common standard of evaluation in most actual HSR schemes still to be the economic one of cost effectiveness, and the principal method of implementation that of increased privatization of fees and services.<sup>a</sup> This emphasis was signalled in the World Bank’s *World Development Report* (WDR) in both 1996 and 1997, which endorsed the goal of “ensuring universal access to basic health services” but saw it as best achieved through privatization measures. Thus, less efficient public resources (for example, hospitals) should be transferred to “private markets”, and many services previously delivered through public agencies should be subcontracted to private vendors or paid for through vouchers. In either case, “universal access” is not intended to imply universal rights or universal coverage, since it is assumed that most people—all but the very poorest—will be able to pay for these services in the market, either through insurance plans or user fees: “Most curative health care is a (nearly) pure private good—if government does not foot the bill, all but the poorest will find ways to pay for care themselves” (World Bank 1997:53). The end result, all too often, is that vast areas of the (formerly) social sector are opened up for private investment and profit, a good part of which comes from public revenues; the market becomes the source of most services for most people; and those who cannot afford to pay (“the most vulnerable”) are left to be protected by (often non-existent) “safety nets”. In other words, health care becomes essentially a two-tier system: a commodity for many (“health consumers”) and a form of “public assistance”—or an unattainable luxury—for the rest.

It is interesting to go back to the 1978 Alma Ata Declaration’s emphasis on “health for all the people of the world” (WHO 1978:para. X) and the WHO definition of health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO 1948) and as a fundamental human right. Alma Ata’s emphasis on social justice, universal access and intersectoral action is in fact repeated in both the Cairo POA and the Beijing Platform. The Copenhagen Declaration’s Commitment 6 also invokes Alma Ata. Yet many current proponents of HSR seem to be going in the opposite direction—backward in fact, to “vertical, disease-oriented programs” that prevailed in the 1950s and 1960s; to “limited public expenditures” focused on a narrowly defined “package of services”; and to privatized care, financing and user fees (Koivusalo and Ollila 1997:113).

Current debates about health care reform resolve into a distinction between whether health should be treated as a private commodity or as a public good and a human right. From the latter perspective, social justice in the provision of health care services involves three basic components: access, resources and quality. But in no country in the world where the unfettered free market has overridden principles of universality, public responsibility and social rights have these three components been achieved.<sup>b</sup> World Bank

loans as incentives to maintain social sector investments, or injections of private and public donor grants targeted at preventable, life-threatening diseases, can help alleviate major health crises, but they cannot finance comprehensive health systems or guarantee equal access to all. Without a fundamental redistribution of the world's wealth, among and within countries, these remedies will remain at best temporary palliatives and UN documents vague promises. And beyond the resource problem, we would still face the governance problem: creating reliable monitoring mechanisms to enforce universal standards of care, dignity and free choice.

<sup>a</sup> Elson and Evers 1998; Standing 1999; DAWN 1999; WEDO 1999.

<sup>b</sup> A recent UNICEF report of 27 countries in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union found that free markets have an adverse impact on gender equality and leave women and girls "worse off". This is particularly true in regard to rising unemployment and loss of income as well as reduced life expectancy due to "increased smoking, alcohol consumption, drug abuse and unsafe sexual activity" resulting in high rates of HIV/AIDS (Olson 1999; UNICEF 1999).

But the adverse impact of globalization is unevenly distributed. Very often women are those whose care-taking burdens multiply when public health and other social services are cut; because women are more likely than men to be employed in the state sector, they suffer higher unemployment rates due to privatization; they are also most vulnerable to prostitution and sexual trafficking under these conditions.<sup>37</sup> Women pay for the cumulative social deficits of globalization and privatization in another way as well, in so far as these trends undermine the very international instruments that were designed to promote gender equality. O'Neil, referring mainly to the Women's Convention and the ICESCR, points out that these international conventions—with their provisions for "better social protection through social security programs, health and safety regulations, day care centres and accessible health care"—were written with the model of a strong, interventionist state in mind, based on principles of solidarity and social rights. One could make the same observation about the UN conference documents of the 1990s, in so far as they continually call upon signatory governments to take positive actions to implement gender equality, women's empowerment, eradication of poverty and access to health care, including comprehensive reproductive and sexual health services. The incompatibility between such provisions and global economic trends contributes to the failure of states to carry out their commitments (O'Neil 1995:62). With the best will in the world, the privatized state, caught between debt and the global marketplace, may simply shrug its overburdened shoulders and say: Fine, but who is going to pay for these human rights?

Yet globalization also has a positive side that has contributed to the expansion of women's movements for equality, health and empowerment. Globalizing processes—of which the UN conferences have been a kind of microcosm—have provided a medium through which transnational women's movements have come together across their many cultural, regional and class differences to develop common political goals and strategies (Eisenstein 1998). In the face of shifts in health care policies and practices, women are emerging not only as victims but also as important actors, asserting their right to respect, self-determination and access to quality, affordable services.

A more ambiguous consequence of globalization is the tendency for women's organizations to participate in so-called partnerships with governments, IGOs and international donor agencies. In part this reflects a positive gain: women's and other transnational NGOs have consistently demanded that their voices and views be heard, and accordingly all of the 1990s UN conference documents acknowledge that

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<sup>37</sup> WEDO 1999; United Nations 1995:ch. II; Eisenstein 1998.

governments and international organizations should strengthen “partnerships with the NGO sector” and integrate civil society groups into the policy-making process. Nonetheless, under existing conditions the concept of “partnership” between NGOs and most governing institutions, whether at the national or the international level, raises many troubling concerns. In the best of scenarios, will NGOs—particularly women’s NGOs—find themselves doing public sector work without public sector authority and with inadequate resources? Will they unwittingly help to further the process of privatization, relieving the state of responsibility for providing universally accessible social services and for enforcing private sector compliance with human rights standards? The inequality of power and resources between large institutions and NGOs not only undermines the possibility of real “partnership” but also creates a catch-22 in which, to “build capacity” among NGOs so that they can “come to the table” with dignity and respect, the dominant party in the “partnership” must play the role of donor, thus reinforcing its power.

### ***The experience of NGOs as country-level implementers, monitors and “partners”***

Perhaps the most useful outcome of women’s health activists’ participation in the UN conferences of the 1990s was that it armed them with guidelines and a human rights framework to more rigorously evaluate existing reproductive and sexual health services in their countries and advocate for better quality and access. Cross-country surveys conducted by transnational coordinating groups such as DAWN and WEDO reveal that the Cairo POA is alive and well at the country level—thanks largely to the efforts of women’s NGOs that have become its de facto caretakers and implementers on the ground. But the extent to which these efforts have resulted in any concrete policy changes or improvements in health services and their enabling conditions varies greatly from one country to another. The surveys show that the actual applications of health sector reform, as opposed to technocratic theories, are also highly context-specific; their direction in practice depends as much on the political will and ideology of government agencies, and the skill and commitment of feminist advocates, as on the availability of resources.

Moreover, when we look more closely at the national setting, it would appear that the very concept of “privatization” is too abstract. We need to deconstruct this concept in the light of actual practices to know what we are talking about when we refer to the “private (that is, non-governmental) sector”: for-profit corporations? non-profit NGOs? religious institutions? grassroots CBOs, religious or secular? or some hybrid arrangement linking two or more of these? Each will have very different purposes and social philosophies; the question is: which are more likely to subscribe to principles of social justice, solidarity, universality and gender, class and racial-ethnic equality? Next, we have to ask the extent to which mechanisms exist to assure *public accountability* to the communities most affected by services or implementation activities, even if the organization in question is “private”. Finally, there are issues of scale and power. Is the NGO in question an international giant like CARE or IPPF, or a locally based and often underresourced group like SOS-Corpo in Brazil or the Women’s Health Project in South Africa? Organizations with the strongest links and accountability to local communities may be those with the least power and resources.

DAWN’s survey of post-Cairo implementation efforts involved 23 countries in five geographical regions (DAWN 1999). With regard to concrete outcomes of implementation, DAWN’s assessment is decidedly mixed but with a cautiously optimistic tone overall. Primary among its findings is the “effective impact” the ICPD process—

helped very much by the momentum and energy of Beijing—has had “across the South”. This impact is evident in both “a semantic revolution,” incorporating the language of reproductive and sexual health and rights, and a number of positive long-term developments in the realm of policies and services. These include, for example, the official abandonment of demographic targets in some countries (India, Thailand); the integration and cross-sectoral coordination of women’s health, maternal and child health and family planning services in some countries (Brazil, Ghana, the Philippines); a broader definition of reproductive health to now include components such as interventions against domestic violence (South Africa), breast and cervical cancer treatment and prevention (Brazil, Mexico, the Philippines), and HIV/STD treatment and prevention; and reforms expanding women’s access to legal abortion, trained providers and follow-up treatment for post-abortion complications.

On the negative side, however, DAWN found as many disturbing trends in most of the countries surveyed. These include the persistence of verticality and resistance to “integrative efforts” in many health programmes; a continued imbalance in resources, with programmes renamed “reproductive health” but family planning still receiving “much bigger” allocations than other components; narrow versions of “health reform”, including the proliferation of privatization and cost-recovery schemes that “keep the poorer populations...away from hospitals and health centers”; the persistent inadequacy of financial resources and dependency on international donor assistance.<sup>38</sup> DAWN’s analysis observes that not only is there an absolute scarcity of resources at the country level but also that “*quality of expenditure is as critical as the amount of resources invested*”. Thus, for example, while “reduction of maternal mortality...requires investments in primary health programs to be combined with improvement in referral systems and obstetric assistance...in the current scenario, donors are reluctant to fund infrastructure, and structural adjustment requirements curtail domestic investment” (DAWN 1999:37). Again, the macroeconomic disabling environment looms large.

The WEDO survey, encompassing 50 countries in all regions, confirms DAWN’s findings but with an even more pessimistic set of conclusions. “All respondents to this survey,” it notes, “cite economic reforms as paramount constraints in implementing the ICPD Programme. Health sector reform in particular is emerging in most countries as a challenge to expansion of reproductive health services” (WEDO 1999:10). Nearly everywhere that cost-recovery mechanisms, especially user fees and privatized services, have been introduced, the results have been disastrous for women as clients. In Zimbabwe, for example, the initiation of user fees for prenatal care has led to a decline in clinic attendance and an increase in maternal mortality rates by a factor of five, according to NGO monitors in that country. Moreover, women who do attend hospitals or other health centres to receive maternal health care must not only pay for their medications but also provide their own bandages and bring along candles to provide lighting! The decline in public spending and commodification of health care due to HSR has resulted in hospital closings in Peru and Russia. In Bulgaria and Ukraine it has led to a disproportionate and risky reliance on repeat abortions because women cannot afford contraceptives at market prices (WEDO 1999).

Respondents to the WEDO survey confirm the negative impact of HSR on women not only as users of services but also as the majority of health workers, many of whom are

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<sup>38</sup> As pointed out earlier, disproportionate financing of family planning over the rest of reproductive health was one of the “fault lines” built into the original Cairo document.

now laid off due to cutbacks and wage freezes in the public sector. They also note the direct burdens on women as household maintainers, who must now fill the vacuum of diminished social services by spending more time caring for sick and disabled family members and neighbours. In other words, an undetermined proportion of health care gets “privatized” into unpaid household labour—a hidden tax that gender inequities still assign to women and a “global burden of disease” that nobody computes into Disability-Adjusted Life Years (DALYs). At the same time, however, some reported developments are more mixed. In certain countries, decentralization of services, a common aspect of health reform, has in fact meant an increase in efficiency and in access for poor and rural women. Yet the devolution of services from the central government to district or local governments—or to NGOs—also frequently entails the transfer of greater authority and responsibility without adequate finances, equipment and staff. Or occasionally (as in India’s “Target-Free Approach”) it seems to bring greater decision-making authority for local providers but not greater empowerment or “choice” for women as clients.

This pattern of unevenness also affects NGO-government “partnerships”. On the one hand, the WEDO survey and case studies by HERA members have uncovered troubling signs that locally based women’s health and other NGOs are being pulled into a global privatization strategy that “empowers” them with too few resources to do too much. Especially in countries that are most dependent on international donor aid and where governments have enacted SAPs, women’s NGOs have filled the vacuum in service provision, replicating the expanded care-taking functions of individual women in households. This is true particularly in some African and Caribbean countries, and most particularly with regard to services for adolescents. On the other hand, where the decentralization of health programmes and services has entailed serious initiatives to involve grassroots women and women’s NGOs in decision making, what can emerge is a more participatory, democratic model of health care management. This appears to be the case in Bolivia, Brazil, Peru and South Africa (HERA 1998; WEDO 1999).

Looking briefly at a few case studies may make these varied patterns more concrete.<sup>39</sup> In India, for example, a target-driven, often coercive population control policy provoked protests by women’s groups throughout the 1980s and calls for reform even by more mainstream voices in the early 1990s. These critiques were reinforced by the Cairo conference and resulted in a government- and World Bank-sponsored effort in 1996 to introduce a “Target-Free Approach” (TFA) and a more integrated reproductive and child health (RCH) programme. The major elements projected for this new approach include not only (i) eliminating method-specific demographic targets but also (ii) moving to “client-centred program management”, (iii) expanding the range of choice, (iv) providing an “essential package of reproductive and child health services”, and (v) involving both NGOs and *panchayats* in implementing the new policy. NGOs specifically are supposed to have a complementary role to that of government in the new RCH programme, including involvement in community-level advocacy, counselling, screening, funding, monitoring and deploying innovative projects such as mobile services.<sup>40</sup>

Despite the very good intentions of India’s new policy, however, a review by Health Watch—a network of civil society organizations, researchers and activists, many of them from the women’s health movement—confirms that numerical targets and quantitative

<sup>39</sup> In a much longer version of the present chapter, I document this analysis with country-level case studies based in Brazil, Egypt, India, Iran, Nigeria, Peru, South Africa, Tajikistan, Trinidad and Tobago, and the United States.

<sup>40</sup> Health Watch 1999; Visaria and Visaria 1999; Nayyar 1999; Pachauri 1999.



methods of evaluating performance are still well in place, only determined at the local rather than the national level. In some of the states reviewed, the reforms seem to empower not clients but auxiliary nurse-midwives, who "suggest" the method of contraception based on surviving number of children (Health Watch 1999). In a field study of how the TFA is working in two states, Visaria and Visaria (1999) report that in Rajasthan targets for "acceptors" (now locally determined) are still the main focus, although incentive payments have been dropped. Most women are still delivering at home with traditional birth attendants, and the concerns of providers seem weighted far more toward the health of infants than toward the health and rights of women. Women who seek abortions or complain of RTI or STD symptoms are referred to private doctors, who charge fees they cannot afford. In Tamil Nadu, however, the conditions of maternal and reproductive health care appear considerably better, with much greater emphasis on client agency, encouraging hospital-based deliveries and lowering maternal mortality. Health workers are pleased that now "the pressure is off" (for meeting family planning quotas) and they "are able to inquire about women's health, their children's health" and are "better accepted in the community" because people identify them not just "as family planning workers" but as general family care providers. Thus implementation of the programme on the ground depends very much on the local culture of health provision and awareness, which differs between regions and states (Visaria and Visaria 1999:92, 99).

A somewhat different situation exists in Peru, where the movement for women's health and rights has also been highly mobilized and effective over the past decade. In the post-Cairo period, Peruvian women's groups have been involved in a complicated mix of activities: monitoring and protesting government violations of women's reproductive and sexual rights, providing extensive reproductive health services and simultaneously working in "partnership" with the government to make services more integrated and responsive. In 1996-1997 the Latin American and Caribbean Committee for the Defence of Women's Rights (CLADEM) and other women's NGOs in Peru helped to document the rampant forced sterilization of poor, rural and indigenous women in some towns, where providers believed that fulfilment of quotas was a condition for job retention and promotion. The coercive tactics these women experienced ranged from promised gifts of food and clothing to intimidation and humiliation. Finally, when three women died from the procedure, Peruvian women's NGOs called for the resignation of the Minister of Health (CRLP/CLADEM 1999; WEDO 1999). Women's health and rights groups in Peru have also worked to expose other forms of abuse of women in Peruvian hospitals and clinics. In 1998 they brought the particularly horrifying case of Marina, raped by a public health doctor in his private office under the pretext of a gynaecological exam, before the Inter-American Human Rights Commission—the first sexual rights case that body has reviewed (CRLP/CLADEM 1999; Stanchieri et al. 1999).

To assess how skilled and experienced NGOs might perform a bridging function to make government clinicians and staff more sensitive to the real health needs and priorities of poor women, we can look at the work of the organization *Movimiento Manuela Ramos* (Manuela) in its *ReproSalud* project in Peru. Begun in 1995 and funded through a US\$22 million grant from USAID, *ReproSalud* is intended to bring innovative approaches to improving the reproductive health of women in peri-urban and rural areas while also attempting to empower grassroots women to make claims on public health services. Emphasizing preventive and participatory methods, the project aims to "actively [involve] women in identifying, prioritizing and resolving their own reproductive health problems" and to make sure that women's perspectives are fully incorporated into all

levels of public health care design and delivery (Galdos and Feringa 1998). This example illustrates an undeniable reality: *in many contexts the women's NGOs that originated the feminist values of the ICPD POA are the organizations best qualified to put those values into practice.* In stark contrast to the record of sterilization abuse and clinic violence in Peru's public health facilities, ReproSalud's locally sensitive and empowering methods are sure to be more compatible with the real needs and desires of rural and indigenous women, who tend to avoid public health services because of the indignities they suffer there.

At the same time, such extensive commitment of NGO energies to direct service provision, in close collaboration with both large international donors and the national government, creates dilemmas for previously autonomous NGOs like Manuela. One of the most perplexing of such dilemmas, as Manuela's members recognize, is the tension inherent in "*the dual role of collaborating and critiquing*" (Galdos and Feringa 1998:32). This tension arose sharply in relation to the coercive sterilization campaigns described above. There, feminist NGOs found themselves caught between genuine atrocities in the public health services and the eagerness of right-wing, religious forces to use these incidents to repudiate all public sector family planning programmes. Only after an ineffective period of attempting "quiet diplomacy" were they able to speak publicly in opposition to sterilization abuse. In the clinical rape incident, Manuela referred the case to CLADEM "because it did not want to jeopardize its tenuous relationship with the [Ministry of Health] MOH" (1998:29). Not only does Manuela find its oppositional role compromised but perhaps more problematic is the fact that Manuela, while performing major public health functions through its ReproSalud project, is not part of the public sector and has neither the *authority* nor the *accountability* of a government agency. So it sits tenuously in between the public and the private, while relieving the public sector of responsibility.

Noel-De Bique (1998) articulates some of the more troubling questions raised by NGO involvement in ICPD implementation through both government "partnerships" and direct service provision. First, addressing the disparity in resources, she asks: "To what extent will the work of NGOs be funded by government for the delivery of services? Have resources been committed for the institutional strengthening of such NGOs?" In most of the cases reported in the WEDO, DAWN and HERA surveys, the answer is clearly no. Second, she cites the inherent conflict that NGOs like Manuela are forced to contend with: the "drive to professionalize" and "to compete effectively in a privatized health environment" versus a deep-felt commitment "to provide quality care for all, particularly for those who are unable to afford it". This is the ambiguous and uncomfortable space—between the hegemonic market and the moribund welfare state—occupied by women's health NGOs. Finally, Noel-De Bique suggests that there is a kind of reverse inequality whereby government officials responsible for policy formulation and implementation of UN conference agreements "lag behind the work and experience of NGOs". Yet "NGO diversity is not reflected in government structures or in the institutions which are mandated to implement or monitor" such agreements. This is not only a problem of ensuring greater *inclusion* of NGOs in government programme planning and review but also one of ensuring the *accountability* of NGOs themselves to a broader grassroots movement. How can NGOs tied into formal government or donor partnerships "continue to see their role as representing the interests of the broadest base of civil society" (1998:38)?

Women's health NGOs in a few countries have developed creative solutions to these kinds of problems, working toward a model of "partnership" with government that remains organically linked to the larger women's movement. One such model can be

found in the relations between Brazil's women's health movement—organized since 1991 into a national network of some 200 organizations and centres (the National Feminist Health and Reproductive Rights Network, or Rede Saúde)—and government agencies responsible for implementing the ICPD POA. These relations have evolved over a decade and a half of measures to embed health policy in the processes of democratization and civil society engagement. As a result, the women's health movement in Brazil has become *institutionalized* to an unparalleled degree, through representation on a wide array of commissions to oversee government health policies.

As early as 1983, long before the Cairo conference, the Brazilian women's movement pioneered a Programme for Integrated Women's Health Care (PAISM), which was adopted by the Ministry of Health the following year and anticipated the wide range of services encompassed in Cairo's concept of "reproductive health". A strong rights perspective has also infused the work of Brazilian women's health NGOs through their close alliance with the National Council of Women's Rights (CNDM), which has given high priority to health issues. Moreover, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, feminist health activists in Brazil have occupied key roles in some national, state and municipal agencies concerned with health (most notably in the city of São Paulo), as well as participating in a Women's Health Cross-Sectoral Commission (CISMU) that now functions as a National Health Council advisory board. In the post-Cairo years this feminist constellation has won significant policy and legislative reforms to actualize the sexual and reproductive health goals of PAISM and ICPD, including defeat of foetal "right to life" proposals in the legislature and expansion of access to safe, legal abortion (Corrêa 1999; LACWHN 1998). Brazil's National Commission on Population and Development (CNPD), set up in 1995 to monitor implementation of the ICPD, not only is headed by a leading figure of the women's health movement but also includes women's NGO representatives and integrates 10 different ministries. The CNPD's positions strongly endorse a politics of redistribution (for example, minimum income guarantees), solidarity, social accountability and human rights (CNPD 1999).

What allows this elaborate intersection of state and autonomous mechanisms by women's health activists is the nature of the Brazilian health system itself. The Brazilian government and society remain firmly committed to a universal health system (SUS) providing free coverage for many basic treatments and services and giving priority to primary care and reproductive and sexual health, including HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, that system involves increased financing for public sector health care; a high degree of integration (multi-sectoral approaches) as well as decentralization; and "social accountability mechanisms in the form of [citizens'] health councils that operate at all levels (national, state, local)" (Corrêa 1999:14). To be sure, budgetary constraints and the persistence of vast social, racial and regional inequalities in access to services and the quality of care still plague Brazil's SUS. Nonetheless, in Corrêa's view health reform in Brazil has succeeded and substantially improved "women's quality of life" for two reasons. The first of these is "the inherent characteristics of the SUS: public investment, universality and thorough planning and prioritization of basic health care". The second is the indispensable role of women's organizations "in exerting pressure on

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<sup>41</sup> The SUS provides over 70 per cent of outpatient and hospital care, managing a vast network of public units and accredited private services. For approximately 120 million Brazilians (out of a total population of around 160 million), SUS is the sole source of medical care and provides a free, all-inclusive benefits package (Corrêa 1999). On HIV/AIDS services, see Parker (2000).

the health system (convincing managers, sensitizing and training health professionals) and...mobilizing public support, creating coalitions, stimulating public debate and systematically monitoring policies” (1999:21).

The partnership model presented in the Brazil scenario is one of (i) strong representation on government/civil society monitoring bodies (CNPD, CISMU, CNDM) by (ii) nationally coordinated networks of independent women’s NGOs (Rede Saúde), which in turn represent (iii) locally based activist groups that are closely tied *both* to grassroots community-based organizations *and* to health professionals and managers. These organizations provide the connection and make the necessary translation of Cairo principles at the local and the national levels. It is an organic model that links each level of decision making and interweaves government and civil society.<sup>42</sup> Yet the Brazilian model grows out of very particular historical and political circumstances that may not be easily transferable to other countries. More typically, “partnerships” between NGOs and governments might better be described as partnerships between NGOs and international donor agencies, for which NGOs become not only the conduits of health reform project funds but also in effect the *administrators of a health reform agenda over and above the state*. In cases where NGOs are trying to involve and retrain government health workers and administrators, the result will likely be improved public services for poor women and their children. In other cases, however, will the positioning of NGOs *between* the state and external donors serve to erode even further state responsibility for the quality of health care? Will this in turn lead to a shift in the balance of power, where human development and health are concerned, from state institutions to international donor agencies and civil society organizations? Under what conditions might this form of “NGO privatization” either advance or retard the goals of gender equality, human rights *and* public accountability in health care provision?

### ***The many faces of privatization***

Recently many commentators have expressed concerns about what I earlier called the underside of NGO empowerment in both transnational and national political processes. Usually these critiques are made from the standpoint of *less* empowered groups (community-based organizations, grassroots organizations) as well as a position of scepticism toward the objectives and motives of powerful international donors. Summarizing this set of arguments, Koivusalo and Ollila ponder whether NGOs are being “used as a vehicle for privatization and social sector restructuring” that meets the needs of donors more than those of poor people in developing countries. They worry that projects elevating NGOs as providers and implementers of social sector reform may promote a “neoliberal, market-based model of social provisioning” and the further shrinkage of the state’s role. Moreover, the increasing professionalization and donor dependency of many NGOs not only risks muting their capacity for effective advocacy and opposition (as in the case of Manuela in Peru) but also tends “to [undermine] grassroots organizations representing poor people” and to divert or disable “oppressed people...from demanding that the state agencies deliver the goods”.<sup>43</sup> Yet NGOs may be

<sup>42</sup> A similar model of effective partnership, in which women’s NGOs maintain both their autonomy and their accountability to broader social movements, exists in South Africa, particularly in the work of the Women’s Health Project (WHP) and its Transformation of Reproductive Health Services Project, which is funded mainly by UNFPA and the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development. I include an analysis of this model in the longer version of this report. See also Klugman et al. 1998; Xaba et al. 1998; and NPU 1999.

<sup>43</sup> Koivusalo and Ollila 1997:100; Silliman 1999:156; Lang 1997.

no more efficient, qualified or sensitive to community needs than government officials, while lacking the presumed accountability of those officials to local communities.

While affirming these concerns to some extent, national-level cases reveal a much more complex picture. First, it is crucial to remember that “NGOs” are not a monolith; they vary tremendously in their size, power and resources, their relations to both donors and national governments, and above all the extent and quality of their connection with grassroots movements. Most women’s NGOs surveyed by DAWN, WEDO and HERA make great efforts both to connect with the voices and needs of grassroots women and to “work with, rather than replace, the functions of the state” (Koivusalo and Ollila 1997:101). Those involved in direct provision of services are in some cases troubled about the state abdicating its functions and the burden this places on their own workload. In other cases they are finding creative ways to use their gender education and training skills to enhance and expand the role of local and district public health providers, thus bringing the state back in (ReproSalud in Peru and WHP in South Africa, for example). In most cases, however, women’s NGOs become involved in providing health services to meet an urgent and desperate need that would not be met otherwise. In situations where governments are burdened with debt, corrupt or disinterested, or the state is in chaos or disarray, the idea of popular demands on state agencies seems fanciful, or a luxury in the face of survival.

Second, like NGOs, international donor agencies represent a wide spectrum. Structurally, some are private foundations with a great deal of flexibility and freedom from red tape; some are annexes of government ministries or UN agencies with tremendously onerous bureaucratic requirements they are forced both to impose and to fulfil; some are large and complex international financial institutions, like the World Bank, whose aims and procedures may differ from one sectoral or regional office to another. Donors’ political agendas are just as varied: some may be carrying out neoliberal, market-promoting purposes; others, humanitarian purposes; others, both at once. In the best (or worst) of circumstances, privatization may be less the cause than the consequence of a lack of capacity on the part of state agencies and the urgent need to “deliver the goods” in whatever way possible. Further, especially given the scarcity of funds everywhere, sometimes it may be necessary to take a hard-nosed attitude toward the motives of international donors. Their interest in evading state bureaucracies or corruption, or in garnering a “popular” constituency by supporting NGOs, may be offset by the importance of projects that advance health and protect human rights: developing HIV/AIDS prevention programmes in Brazil; creating alternative models of contraceptive choice in Peru; setting up integrated, “one-stop” quality health services in Uganda; providing seed money to women’s health groups in urban slums in India to make community improvements as they see fit.<sup>44</sup> Some of these projects are funded by the most powerful and suspect donors—the World Bank in Brazil and India, USAID in Peru and Uganda. Yet these projects also appear to be influenced by feminist goals and attempting to empower the poorest women in the communities where they live. Progressive critics have to deal with this contradiction and figure out what it means in the long run.

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<sup>44</sup> See Gill/World Bank (1999) for an interesting account of Bank-supported health and community development projects linking local NGOs and poor grassroots women in Hyderabad, India. The Delivery of Improved Services for Health (DISH) project in Uganda (a partnership among two programmes at the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, one at the University of North Carolina and the Uganda Ministry of Health) integrates the whole range of reproductive and sexual health services included in the Cairo POA, under the slogan, “Care for Others, Care for Yourself.” See <http://www.jhuccp.org> for more information.

The issue of NGOs abetting privatization by functioning as service providers is complicated by another factor: the growing power of religious institutions as not only opponents but also “private” *providers* of reproductive health care. A case in point is the United States, where not only have huge for-profit “managed care” institutions (often insurance companies) virtually taken over control of most health care, restricting patients’ access and freedom of choice; but the Catholic Church, with its vast network of hospitals, is rapidly becoming one of the most important health providers in the country.<sup>45</sup> As CFFC’s ongoing survey of the trend toward Catholic/non-Catholic hospital mergers reveals, in some US towns and cities Catholic hospitals are now the only option available. As a result, women who depend on those hospitals are de facto deprived of many essential reproductive health services that the church considers immoral (CFFC 1998, 1999). This ominous trend for women’s reproductive and sexual rights in the United States suggests that women’s NGOs may feel compelled to get involved in both the delivery and the monitoring of health services to counter the rush by private companies and religious organizations to fill the gap left by the state—or, in some cases, to fulfil needs no one else is willing to meet.<sup>46</sup>

Finally states, too, are tremendously varied, and the differences in their political cultures, ideologies and institutional structures—as much as their economic conditions—are an important factor determining the potential impact of NGO activities. It is interesting in this respect to contrast the nature and limits of NGO-government “partnership” in Brazil and the Philippines—two countries that are predominantly Catholic, have undergone recent transformation from dictatorship to democracy and are characterized by strong and vibrant civil society (including women’s) movements. Indeed, the women’s health movements in Brazil and the Philippines are arguably the strongest, the most well coordinated and most organically linked to popular grassroots movements of any in the world. Women’s health NGOs in the Philippines—which generally operate in an organized coalition framework—have made important achievements in regard to implementing the principles of the ICPD. In part due to a sympathetic new Minister of Health, but even more to “sustained advocacy by [women’s NGOs] and feminist individuals in the government”, they have managed to turn the country’s population policy in a much more feminist direction (Francisco 1998:2). The previously narrow and bifurcated family planning programme (administered by the National Population Commission) and maternal health programme (administered by the Department of Health) have now been merged into a much broader Women’s Health and Safe Motherhood Project (WHSMP), one of whose major components is “gender and women’s empowerment”. This shift to a reproductive health approach has involved not only the elimination of targets but also new programmes for the diagnosis and treatment of STDs, RTIs and cervical cancer (DAWN 1999).

Yet other aspects of the Philippines reproductive health policy remain hostile to women’s and young people’s sexual and reproductive rights and seemingly impervious to the efforts of women’s groups to initiate change. Not only does the Philippines continue

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<sup>45</sup> On managed care in the United States, see Rivera et al. 1997 and Annas 1997; on the exclusion of poor Americans from health insurance coverage, see Pear 1999. According to the latest figures, 16.3 per cent of Americans (44.3 million people) lack any health insurance, an increase of 4.5 million since 1993.

<sup>46</sup> The National Abortion Federation (NAF), a consortium of both non-profit and for-profit free-standing abortion clinics in the United States, has operated by default since 1976; for, although abortion is a constitutional right in the United States, public hospitals and many private physicians refuse to provide abortions because of continued harassment by anti-abortion forces.

to have one of the most restrictive abortion policies in the world, but the reproductive health programme provides virtually no adolescent sexual and reproductive health services, no initiatives to promote male responsibility, and little in the way of services to address violence against women. Sexuality education is limited to the “family life” curriculum approved by the church, and even the provision of contraceptives is constrained by both church resistance and dependence on donors for imported supplies. Despite an intensely pro-natalist, pro-motherhood culture, women in the Philippines do not have access to quality prenatal and obstetric care, and seven out of ten births occur at home (Francisco 1998; DAWN 1999). And why is this the case, despite the tireless efforts of a highly vocal and mobilized women’s health movement? One has only to look at two structural features of the Philippines state that democratization has left untouched: the deeply entrenched political power of the Catholic Church in nearly every area of social policy—far greater than the church wields in Brazil; and an economic system that has not only been drained by recent crises and IMF-imposed “fiscal discipline” but is historically and ideologically committed to privatization and commercialism. Even before severe cuts diminished the already meagre health budget from 3.4 per cent to a mere 2.2 per cent of total government spending (compared to Brazil’s 15.5 per cent), the vast majority of health care provision in the country was already privatized and subject to user fees—out of reach for much of the impoverished population (WEDO 1999).

In the absence of any official recognition of health care, including reproductive and sexual health, as a social and human right, or of state responsibility to meet basic health needs, women’s groups in the Philippines struggle on every front: participating actively in the Freedom from Debt Coalition and the Anti-Poverty Coalition; publicly opposing privatization and user fees in the health sector; publicizing the sexual exploitation and abuse of young migrant women who work in the “free enterprise zones”; as well as launching a major campaign for access to safe contraception.<sup>47</sup> Maintaining a separate and sometimes oppositional posture vis-à-vis the state is essential in this context, whereas a quasi-“partnership”—with strong ties to grassroots movements and readiness to be critical when the need arises—seems more feasible in the Brazilian context. A comparison of these two country contexts illustrates that the state does matter; that its effectiveness, investment policies and social philosophy help determine the limits of what civil society organizations will be able to achieve in the realm of health and human development.

Both the Brazilian and the South African scenarios suggest models in which active civil society organizations and socially committed state institutions can interact to create strong systems of accountability even where some services are provided by NGOs or the private sector. We must continue to press for strengthened state functions and the responsibility of the state to protect universal access to the full range of health care as a matter of human rights. Yet we also have to address the global inequities behind the incapacity of many states to deliver, with the best of will and adherence to human rights principles. South Africa has the most extensive constitutional and legal guarantees of sexual, reproductive and health rights of any country in the world, along with a vibrant government/civil society “partnership” working for their enforcement. Yet a government commission has just issued a report finding that its public hospital system “is so short of

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<sup>47</sup> This is the current agenda of WomanHealth Philippines, but the activities described are ones in which a broad coalition of women’s health groups—Linangan ng Kababaihan, Inc. (LIKHAAN), Gabriela, Women’s Education Development Productivity and Research Organization (WEDPRO) and others—participate jointly (Interview with Mercedes Fabros, Director of WomanHealth Philippines, March 1999).

cash that it lacks enough workers, medical equipment, ambulances, linens and medicine to provide proper care to the poor” (Swarns 1999).

But, even if transnational movements succeeded in winning effective redistributive policies and international enforcement mechanisms to transform the global balance of resources, one has to assume that markets in the foreseeable future are here to stay. It is not a question of states *versus* markets, public *versus* private, but rather of *which kinds* of private entities are going to be involved in providing basic social services, with *what sorts of values and objectives*, and under *what kind of public scrutiny and accountability mechanisms* to assure equality, quality of care and adherence to human rights norms. In the twenty-first century, the provision and monitoring of social rights will increasingly belong to hybrid institutions that cut across old boundaries of public and private and local, national and international.

### **NGOs, the State and Global Governance: What Can We Learn from the Campaigns for Reproductive and Sexual Rights?**

The purpose of this chapter has been to examine critically the role that transnational women’s NGOs in the 1990s have played in the creation and implementation of international agreements related to reproductive and sexual rights. My focus throughout has been twofold: first, to explore the multiple ways in which reproductive and sexual rights intersect with, and are embraced within, a wide range of health, human rights, social and gender justice, and human development issues; and, second, to use this inquiry to rethink the complex political dynamics in which transnational women’s NGOs find themselves, as they manoeuvre within a globalizing yet deeply divided and grossly inequitable world. As this dual vision might suggest, I believe that feminist groups have had a major impact at both international and national levels in shifting dominant discourses about reproduction, population and sexuality in a direction that puts the ends of women’s health and empowerment above that of reducing population growth. This is a major historical achievement and a mark of the power of transnational women’s NGOs. At the same time, I also believe that the translation of this discursive shift into effective policies and programmes has been seriously limited by global economic processes, and religious and cultural forces whose institutional power is far greater than any that feminist groups could possibly attain at this juncture. It has also been limited, however, by internal divisions and strategic short-sightedness among the women’s groups themselves. Specifically, I would sum up the “lessons learned,” from this study as follows.

*Need for stronger alliances.* Participation by transnational women’s NGOs in the UN conferences of the 1990s was the decisive factor in achieving recognition of a new approach to “population” issues in international documents. This approach (i) recognizes reproductive and sexual rights as fundamental human rights; (ii) links those rights firmly to principles of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls; and (iii) relocates family planning within a broad array of reproductive and primary health care needs. Nonetheless, efforts by Women’s Caucus participants to link reproductive and sexual rights to social development (“enabling conditions”) through mechanisms for generating and redistributing resources and instituting changes in global economic decision making were too little, too late and largely unsuccessful. I would attribute this failure to three central causes:



- Preoccupation with the threat of fundamentalist forces and thus reluctance to jeopardize alliances with mainstream population and family planning groups and government delegations (the United States and the European Union) committed to market-oriented macroeconomic policies. This reluctance made it difficult to take a strong, uncompromising position on structural transformations and redistributive policies as the basis for implementing a broad approach to reproductive and sexual health.
- Divisions among transnational women's health NGOs, particularly between those that tend to focus more on implementing reproductive and sexual health and rights and working to change the policies of intergovernmental and governmental institutions, and those that tend to focus more on opposing population control policies and are suspicious of working within or with those institutions.
- Lack of interest or awareness among many development and environment NGOs concerning the human rights aspects of health, reproduction and sexuality and their linkage to broad economic and social issues.

Such internal divisions, as well as their isolation from other NGOs interested in a social justice agenda, have weakened the international impact of transnational women's health NGOs. In my perception, these divisions are more strategic than political, and every attempt should be made to mend them and re-establish trust in order to build a stronger and more effective transnational movement. In addition, that movement needs to work more closely with transnational development NGOs that are attempting to change global macroeconomic policies and structures. This would serve to educate the latter about the linkages between personal and social rights (especially for women) and to form a counter-alliance that can work independently of *both* fundamentalist and market-oriented forces.

*Need for organization, leadership and bridging mechanisms.* The experience of transnational women's NGOs working to implement reproductive and sexual rights, at both the international and the national levels, affirms that "social movements do not sustain themselves without organizations" (Abdulhadi 1998:669). It is a mistake to dichotomize NGOs and social movements, or activists who work "inside" and those who work "outside" institutions ("lobbying" versus "struggle politics"). The one cannot exist or be effective without the other, and in fact a clear division of labour between those working at different levels, or in different ways, is essential to a movement's long-term viability. In addition, the effectiveness of women's health NGOs both nationally and internationally has depended on strong *leadership*, including effective secretariats or coordination centres. In the context of the UN conferences, this usually has meant one or two NGOs with extensive knowledge and a clear vision taking the lead in planning and strategizing on behalf of the Women's Caucus. In national contexts it has more often meant a coordinating body that directs a coalition of women's NGOs that have a long history of working together. To maintain their legitimacy and their claim to be representative, on the other hand, NGOs and their leadership require organic ties to grassroots social movements or CBOs. Such ties cannot be taken for granted; they must be consciously nurtured. Country-based efforts to implement women's reproductive and sexual rights (as defined in the Cairo and Beijing documents) have been most successful where NGOs are strongly connected to grassroots social movements (for example, Brazil, Peru, the Philippines, South Africa). These examples show that NGOs can act as a bridge between social movements and governing institutions and can work effectively for popular participation in local and national health policy making.

*Need for strong, responsive systems of national governance.* Surveys conducted by both transnational women's NGOs and United Nations agencies provide ample evidence that

free markets and current patterns of privatization are failing to deliver on the promises of Cairo, Beijing and Copenhagen.<sup>48</sup> Certainly they are not providing adequate reproductive and sexual health services for all who need them or assuring the realization of reproductive and sexual rights—much less the right to the highest available standard of health care for all. These surveys suggest the need for health reform programmes that strengthen, rather than weaken, *public* health systems, not only through increased investments but also through reorganization, retraining (for example, in gender sensitivity) and more effective management. At the same time, corruption, insensitivity and inefficiency in public sector health services have been a constant complaint by not only international donor agencies but also community groups and their constituencies—those who depend on the services most.<sup>49</sup> Given this dubious record in many countries, as well as the prevalence of markets everywhere, it is inevitable that private (for-profit) companies and non-profit charitable, NGO and community-based groups will increasingly function side by side with public agencies to provide services and assess their quality. But in such hybrid (government/non-governmental) systems, *it is essential that the regulation and enforcement of universal standards of access and quality remain a state responsibility.*

Women's NGOs can play an important role both as service providers and as civil society advocates that scrutinize health providers, *both* public and private. In some circumstances they can function as “partners” of the state, providing crucial advice and training of health officials and clinicians. But they should not take over the responsibilities of the state to provide overall regulation and assurance of basic health care for all, nor should they cede their independent, critical role. The most successful models of national-level implementation of sexual and reproductive health programmes exist in countries (for example, Brazil and South Africa) with strong state institutions that subscribe to principles of social solidarity and justice (across gender, race-ethnic and class divisions), along with strong civil society organizations that push the state forward and call it to account. In those societies, a high level of democracy and popular mobilization makes it possible for women's NGOs *both* to cooperate with *and* to critique, from a stance of independence, government policies and decision-making bodies. Yet these very conditions suggest that such “best practice” models may not be easily transferable to societies where the political conditions are altogether different.

*Need for strong institutions of global governance, including enforcement mechanisms for an economic “enabling environment”.* Even in those societies where democratic institutions and social solidarity principles prevail, and where women's and other civil society organizations are strong, global economic constraints are making it impossible to carry out the existing social justice agenda (including reproductive and sexual rights and primary health care). International donor institutions, which have the greatest power to deliver resources and secure compliance with international norms, have shown little interest in human rights enforcement and primary concern with cost effectiveness and securing markets. Recent World Bank policies emphasizing poverty reduction, gender equality and social sector investments are encouraging, yet that organization remains immune from any external accountability and constrained by the utilitarian values of a lending institution. The human rights treaty bodies, on the other hand, whose concern

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<sup>48</sup> WEDO 1999; DAWN 1999; UNICEF 1999.

<sup>49</sup> Regarding the treatment of low-income women by public health services, see IRRRAG studies on Brazil (especially the north-east), Egypt, Mexico and the United States in Petchesky and Judd 1998.

with reproductive and sexual health rights is greatly expanding, have little enforcement power and no authority over global finance. Meanwhile, deliberations within the UN system are stymied by the persistent deference to national sovereignty, a lack of political will or commitment to international cooperation on the part of many governments (notably the United States), and grossly insufficient human and financial resources.

Clearly there is a need for radical restructuring of existing global governance institutions that will include both (i) effective mechanisms that assure accountability of the World Bank, the IMF, WTO, TNCs and major donor countries to uphold international human rights principles; and (ii) effective mechanisms of democratic participation for transnational civil society organizations, giving them a genuine place and voice within the UN system. But this kind of transformation is inconceivable without the forceful mobilization of transnational movements worldwide. To this end, women's groups committed to a reproductive and sexual rights agenda must begin to ally much more closely with other transnational NGOs that are using human rights strategies—to eliminate poverty, secure a safe environment, end gender violence, challenge racism and militarism, and create alternative models of development and a more just economic order.

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## Chapter 15

# The Conditions and Consequences of Choice: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment<sup>1</sup>

*Naila Kabeer*<sup>2</sup>

(1999)

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Empowerment is like obscenity; you don't know how to define it but you know it when you see it. (Rappaport cited in Shetty 1991:8)

I like the term empowerment because no one has defined it clearly yet; so it gives us a breathing space to work it out in action terms before we have to pin ourselves down to what it means. I will continue using it until I am sure it does not describe what we are doing. (NGO activist cited in Batliwala 1993:48)

### Introduction

Advocacy on behalf of women that builds on claimed synergies between feminist goals and official development priorities has made greater inroads into the mainstream development agenda than advocacy that argues for these goals on the grounds of their intrinsic value. There is an understandable logic to this. In a situation of limited resources, where policy makers have to adjudicate between competing claims (Razavi 1997), advocacy for feminist goals in intrinsic terms takes policy makers out of their familiar conceptual territory of welfare, poverty and efficiency into a nebulous zone of power and social injustice. There is also a political logic to it: those who stand to gain most from such advocacy carry very little clout with those who set the agendas in major policy-making institutions.

Consequently, when women's empowerment is argued for as an end in itself, it tends to be heard as a "zero-sum" game, with politically weak winners and powerful losers. By contrast, instrumentalist forms of advocacy that combine the argument for gender

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<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing, Naila Kabeer was a fellow of the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, United Kingdom.

equality/women's empowerment with the demonstration of a broad set of desirable multiplier effects offer policy makers the possibility of achieving familiar and approved goals, albeit by unfamiliar means. One set of payoffs claimed for women's empowerment relates to its favourable effects for children's health, family welfare, intrahousehold equity and fertility decline. Such arguments have received a powerful impetus from the Cairo Declaration, which links women's reproductive choice with a range of favourable demographic outcomes. The other set of payoffs links women's empowerment to economic growth and is based on evidence testifying to the inefficiency of patriarchal family relations in terms of market distortions, labour supply inflexibilities and perverse allocative behaviour.<sup>3</sup>

However, the success of instrumentalist advocacy has also had costs. Instrumentalism requires the translation of feminist scholarship into the discourse of policy—and during this process of translation, the terrain of the argument has been shifted and some of the original political edge of feminism lost. This attempt at translation entails efforts to quantify the claims of gender advocacy. Measurement is, of course, a major preoccupation in the policy domain. It reflects a justifiable concern with the empirical verifiability of competing claims for scarce resources in the policy domain. And, given that the very idea of women's empowerment epitomizes, for many policy makers, the unwarranted intrusion of metaphysical concepts into the concrete and practical world of development policy, quantifying empowerment seems to put the concept on more solid and objectively verifiable grounds.

Yet, as the two quotes at the start of this chapter suggest, not everyone accepts that empowerment can be clearly defined, let alone measured. And, for many feminists, the value of the concept lies precisely in its "fuzziness". This lack of clarity about the notion of empowerment reflects the fact that its root concept—power—is itself one of the most contested concepts in the social sciences (Rowlands 1997). It is important, therefore, to clarify at the outset how the concept will be used in this chapter, since this will constitute the standpoint from which various measurement attempts will be assessed. This will be attempted in the rest of this section of the chapter. The second and third sections will review various attempts to devise indicators of empowerment. Indicators can be seen as highly compressed summaries of information, meanings and values. They combine explicit empirical information with implicit assumptions about the meaning of that information. Furthermore, in selecting some categories of information over others, indicators also embody certain values about the kinds of information that "count" in capturing the phenomenon being measured. Because the nature of power is contested, it should be clear from the outset that attempts to measure empowerment are likely to be more value-laden than other, less controversial concepts in the development literature. These are some of the issues addressed in this chapter: the information selected for the construction of various indicators of empowerment; the validity of the indicator as a measure of what it is intended to measure; the values it embodies; and the appropriateness of these values in capturing the idea of women's empowerment.

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<sup>3</sup> Collier 1989; Jones 1986; Sender and Smith 1990; Palmer 1991.

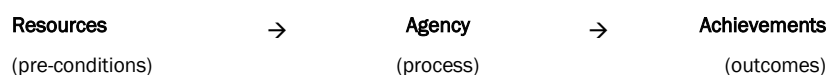
## Conceptualizing Empowerment

### **Resources, agency and achievement**

The notion of empowerment has been used in a bewildering variety of ways—from the mundane to the profound, from the particular to the very general. Empowerment is seen to occur at a number of different levels, to cover a range of different dimensions and to materialize through a variety of different processes. However, central to the idea of empowerment is the idea of “power”. This is the starting point for clarifying how the notion of empowerment will be used in this chapter. One way of thinking about power is in terms of *ability to make choices*: to be disempowered, therefore, implies to be denied choice. The notion of empowerment is thus inescapably bound up with “disempowerment” and refers to the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such ability. In other words, empowerment entails a process of change. People who exercise a great deal of choice in their lives may be very *powerful*, but they are not *empowered* in this sense, because they were never disempowered in the first place.

However, to be made relevant to the analysis of power, the notion of choice has to be qualified in a number of ways. First of all, *choice necessarily implies alternatives*, the ability to have chosen otherwise. There is a logical association between poverty and disempowerment because an insufficiency of the material means for meeting one's basic needs may impose painful trade-offs between important dimensions of choice. However, even when survival imperatives no longer dominate choice, there is still the problem that not all choices are equally relevant to the definition of power. Some choices have greater significance than others in terms of their consequences for people's lives. For instance, the ability to choose to have children and the number of children to have is of greater strategic consequence, and indeed consequentially prior, in a person's life than the ability to choose between apples and pears for lunch.

A distinction can thus be made between first order and second order choices in the analysis of power. First order choices are those strategic life choices—choice of livelihood, where to live, whom to marry, whether to marry, whether to have children, how many children to have, who has rights over children, freedom of movement and choice of friends—that are critical for people to live the lives they want. These strategic life choices help to frame other, less consequential choices that may be important for the quality of one's life but do not constitute its defining parameters. The ability to exercise strategic life choices can be thought of in terms of three dimensions or different “moments” in the process of social change:



*Resources* include material resources in the more conventional economic sense but, for the purposes of this chapter, have to be defined much more widely to encompass the various human and social resources that enhance the ability to exercise choice. Resources in this broader sense are acquired through a variety of social relationships conducted in the various institutional domains that make up a society, including the domains of family, market, state and community. The resources acquired within these various relationships take the form not only of actual allocations but also of future claims and expectations, where access to both will reflect the rules and norms by which distribution and exchange occur within different institutional contexts.

These rules and norms give certain institutional actors authority over others in determining the principles of distribution and exchange. The distribution of “allocative resources” thus tends to be embedded within the distribution of what Giddens (1979) refers to as “authoritative resources”, or the ability to define priorities and enforce claims. Heads of households, chiefs of tribes, directors of firms, managers of organizations, elites within a community are all endowed with decision-making authority in particular institutional contexts by virtue of their positioning within that context. Rules and norms can thus be seen as intangible “enabling” or “disabling” social resources that are drawn upon in the exercise of power and serve to demarcate the boundaries of choice for different categories of individuals.

The second dimension of power relates to *agency*, the ability to define one’s goals and act upon them. Agency is about more than observable action; it also encompasses the meaning, motivation and purpose that individuals bring to their activity—their sense of agency, or what feminists have called “the power within”. Agency often tends to be operationalized as “decision making” in the social science literature, but it can take a variety of other forms. It can take the form of bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis. And it can be exercised by an individual as an individual or by individuals organized as formal or informal groups.

Agency has both positive and negative meanings in relation to power.<sup>4</sup> In the positive sense of “power to”, it refers to people’s capacity to define their own life choices and to pursue their own goals, even in the face of opposition, dissent and resistance from others. Agency can also be exercised in the more negative sense of “power over”, where it implies the capacity of an actor or category of actors to impose their goals on others against their wishes. This, for example, is how agency is often exercised in the context of unequal interpersonal relationships where dominant members use their privileged access to authoritative or allocative resources, or resort to outright coercion, to override dissent or resistance.

However, power can also operate in the absence of any apparent agency. The norms and rules governing social behaviour tend to ensure that certain outcomes are reproduced without any apparent exercise of agency, apart from compliance with the rules. While some of these outcomes are consequentially trivial and hence not relevant to the analysis of power, others relate to the strategic life choices we noted earlier and, to that extent, represent the exercise of power as “non-decision making” (Lukes 1974). The norms of marriage in South Asia, for instance, invest parents with the authority to choose their children’s partners, but are unlikely to be experienced as a form of power—unless such authority is questioned.

Resources and agency together constitute what Sen refers to as capabilities, the potential that people have for living the lives they want, of achieving valued ways of “being and doing”. Sen uses the idea of “functionings” to refer to all the possible ways of being and doing that are valued by people in a given context, and of “*functioning achievements*” to refer to the particular ways of being and doing that are realized by different individuals (Sen 1985). Clearly, where the failure to achieve valued ways of

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<sup>4</sup> My use of the concepts of positive and negative agency echoes Sen’s distinction between positive and negative freedom. Negative freedom corresponds to freedom from the effects of the negative agency of others, or their use of “the power over”. Positive freedom, which corresponds closely to the way in which I am defining positive agency, refers to the ability to live as one chooses, to have the effective “power to achieve chosen results” (Sen 1985:208).

being and doing can be traced to laziness, incompetence or some other reason particular to an individual, the issue of power is not relevant. It is only when the failure to achieve one's goals reflects some deep-seated constraint on the ability to choose that it can be taken as a manifestation of disempowerment.

### **Qualifying choice: Differences and inequality**

A focus on achievements in the measurement of empowerment draws attention to the necessity for some further qualifications to our understanding of choice for the purposes of the analysis in this chapter. Concern with achievements in this context does not relate to *differences* in the choices that people make, but to possible *inequalities* in their capacity to make choices. A lack of uniformity in functioning achievements cannot automatically be interpreted as evidence of power inequalities, because it is highly unlikely that all members of a given society will give equal value to different possible ways of being and doing. Consequently, where there is evidence of gender differentials in functioning achievements, achievements that embody meaningful choices must be disentangled from those that do not. However, this is easier said than measured: it is not always possible to know what people wanted to achieve from information on what they have in fact achieved.

One way of getting around the problem might be to focus on certain universally shared functionings, those that relate to the basic fundamentals of survival and well-being regardless of context. For instance, it is generally agreed that proper nourishment, good health, adequate shelter, reasonable clothing and clean water all constitute primary functionings that are both valued in, and common to, all contexts. If there are systematic gender differences in functioning achievements at this very basic level, it can be taken as evidence of inequalities in the underlying capacity for choice rather than differences in needs, wants or preferences. Focusing on basic needs achievements addresses one aspect of the problem, but it ignores others. In most contexts, inequalities in basic functionings tend to occur in situations of extreme scarcity. Confining the analysis of gender inequality to these achievements alone serves to convey the impression that women's disempowerment is largely a matter of poverty.

This is misleading for two reasons. On the one hand, it misses forms of gender disadvantage that are more likely to characterize better-off sections of society. Prosperity within a society may help to reduce gender inequalities in basic well-being, but intensify other social restrictions on women's ability to make choices (Razavi 1992). On the other hand, it misses out on those dimensions of gender disadvantage among the very poor that do not take the form of basic functioning failures. For instance, gender differentials in life expectancy and children's nutrition—two widely used indicators of gender discrimination at the level of basic well-being—do not appear to be as widespread in sub-Saharan Africa as they do in South Asia. This tends to be attributed to the greater economic contributions that women are able to make in the former context compared to the latter, and to the cultural practices that have evolved in recognition of these differences. This should not be taken to imply that gender disadvantage does not exist in sub-Saharan Africa, but rather that it may take other forms. Thus, while Shaffer (1998) found little evidence of income or consumption disadvantage between male- and female-headed households in Guinea, both men and women in his study cited women's heavier workloads as well as male domination in private and public decision making as manifestations of gender-specific forms of disadvantage within the community.

A second way out of the problem would be to widen our concern from basic survival-related achievements to other functioning achievements that might be considered

to be of social value in most contexts. This is the strategy adopted by UNDP in its Gender-related Development Index (or GDI, a gender-disaggregated Human Development Index or HDI) and Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM). HDI combines country-level data on gross national product (GNP), life expectancy and educational attainment into a single index (UNDP 1995). It is seen to represent the basic foundations from which other valued achievements can be attained: "It is not a measure of well-being. Nor is it a measure of happiness. Instead, it is a measure of empowerment. It indicates that if people have these three choices, they may be able to gain access to other opportunities as well" (UNDP 1985:12). By extension, GDI represents an endorsement of the position that empowerment for women in any context requires, as a precondition, if not perfect gender symmetry in these achievements, then certainly a closing of the gender gap in terms of wages earned, education levels attained and life expectancy. GEM, which combines national data on gender inequalities in income earned (removing the controls introduced for differences in national income levels in the GDI measure) in professional, managerial and technical occupations and in parliamentary representation, takes us beyond the basic preconditions for choice toward achievements that could be regarded as more politically significant measures of choice.

A number of criticisms may be levelled at these global measures, quite apart from the usual questions of data reliability. One is that the GDI does not separate out gender differentials in functioning achievements that reflect overall income levels from those that reflect equality-related achievements. In particular, gender disparities in life expectancy seem to be more closely related to national income levels than, for instance, disparities in education or in earnings. For example, Bangladesh, with half the per capita GNP of Pakistan, has not performed as well in terms of "normalizing" gender differences in life expectancy, but it has achieved a much greater closing of the gender gap in terms of the other achievements that make up both the GDI and the GEM. Indeed, while Bangladesh is ranked lower than Pakistan in terms of the GDI measure, which includes life expectancy, it is ranked higher in terms of the GEM, which does not.

The other point to make is that while we might agree with UNDP that gender disparities in earnings, education, occupational status and parliamentary representation tell us something important about gender inequalities in the ability to make choices, it is only at a more disaggregated level of analysis that we can establish precisely what these disparities are telling us. For instance, the much higher representation of women in parliament, and possibly in professional employment, in Bangladesh than in Pakistan reflects the constitutional quota of public sector jobs and parliamentary seats in the former country. While differences in these measures reflect differences in the two countries in the extent to which public policy has been influenced by the politicized use of religion, they do not help us to distinguish between countries where women arrive in parliament as a result of reserved seats, nominated by the party in power, and those who have been voted in by a wider electorate. Yet the former are likely to be less representative of the wider polity, less effective in parliament and consequently less indicative of women's empowerment in the public domain than the latter. The dramatic increase in the percentage of women voting in elections in Bangladesh is probably a more vibrant measure of political achievement in relation to gender than the percentage of women occupying reserved seats in its parliament.

Global measures of this kind are useful for monitoring differences in achievements across nations and across time, and for drawing attention to problematic disparities. However, it is not possible to identify the different processes conflated within these

measures and hence to know how to respond to the disparities and shortfalls they record. In addition, while there are sound reasons to move the measurement of achievements beyond very basic functionings, such as life expectancy or even education and income, to more complex achievements, such as reducing gender inequalities in political representation, we have to keep in mind that such measurement can only be achieved at the global level by moving away from the criteria of women's choices, or even the values of the communities in which they live, to a definition of "value" that represents a consensus within the international development community.

### **Qualifying choice: "Choosing not to choose"**

The second problem with the use of both agency and achievements as measures of empowerment stems from the central place given to choice in the definition of power. There is an intuitive plausibility to the equation between power and choice as long as what is chosen appears to contribute to the welfare of those making the choice. Where there is evidence of striking gender inequalities in basic well-being achievements, the equation between choice and power would suggest quite plausibly that such inequalities signal the operation of power—either as an absence of choice on the part of women as the subordinate group, or as active discrimination by men as the dominant group.

However, an equation between power and choice would find it far more difficult to accommodate forms of gender inequality, including inequality at the level of basic well-being, that are found to be the product of choices made by women themselves. This problem plays out in the literature on gender and well-being in the form of behaviour on the part of women that appears to suggest that they have internalized the lesser social value given to them on the grounds of their gender. Such behaviour can have adverse implications for their own well-being and for that of other female members of the family. Women's acceptance of their secondary claims on household resources, their acquiescence to violence at the hands of their husbands and their willingness to bear children to the detriment of their own health and survival in order to satisfy their own or their husband's preference for sons, are examples of behaviour by women that undermine their own well-being. Their adherence to social norms and practices associated with son preference, discrimination against daughters in the allocation of food and basic health care that compromises the survival chances of the girl child, promotion of female circumcision, and the oppressive exercise of authority by mothers-in-law over their daughters-in-law (a problem often identified in the South Asian context) are examples of how women's behaviour may undermine the well-being of other female members of their family.

While all these forms of behaviour could be said to reflect "choice", they are also choices that stem from, and serve to reinforce, women's marginalized status. They remind us that power relations are expressed not only through the exercise of agency and choice, but also through the *kinds* of choices made. Power pervades choice through the differentiated values, norms and perceived possibilities that accrue to different social groups by virtue of their positioning within the social hierarchy. This notion of power is a controversial one because it allows for the possibility that power and dominance can operate through consent and complicity as well as through coercion and conflict. Sen makes a similar point: "There is much evidence in history that acute inequalities often survive precisely by making allies out of the deprived. The underdog comes to accept the legitimacy of the unequal order and becomes an implicit accomplice" (1990:126). Sen explains this complicity on the part of subordinate groups as "adapted perceptions", or people learning to make the best of their lot. The possibility of complicity in subordination

disrupts the simple equation between power and choice, because such an equation is premised on the implicit assumption that people act in their own interests (even if it is accepted that their interests will include concern for others). It takes us very close to the notion of false consciousness, an idea that evokes deep discomfort among social scientists of varying political persuasions, posing as it does the idea that the “authenticity” of consciousness can be measured by some objective standard of real interests.

Thus Sen has been attacked, from a cultural relativist standpoint, by Apffel-Marglin and Simon who accuse him of “feminist orientalism”: “Cognitive authority, once again, resides with the expert who has access to ‘objective reality’ and not with the women themselves. Thus the expert’s voice replaces (and eliminates) the women’s voices” (1994:35). However, Apffel-Marglin and Simon, like many who consider “orientalist” any critical standpoint on the question of culture, offer little by way of constructive insights into the issues of injustice that Sen is grappling with. Indeed, it is not clear whether they perceive any injustice at all. In this, as Nussbaum (1995) points out, their analysis shares common ground with the neoclassical practice of taking subjective preferences as the only criteria for making judgements about values and welfare, although they stress “cultural” or group preferences while economists stress individual preferences.

Agarwal agrees with Sen that the absence of protest about gender inequality need not signify the absence of that inequality, but adds that the absence of overt protest need not signify *acceptance* of that inequality either—“compliance need not imply complicity” (1997:25). She notes various clandestine ways in which women in the South Asian context seek to secure their own self-interest while appearing to comply with the cultural norms of self-subordination. According to Agarwal, the emphasis should be more on the external constraints to women acting overtly in their self-interest, and less on women’s lack of awareness of where their interests lie.

While Agarwal makes a valuable point about the importance of recognizing the frequently “strategic” nature of women’s compliance with the norms and practices that deny them choice, the uncomfortable possibility still remains, as Razavi (1992) points out on the basis of her work in rural Iran, that not all women want the option of autonomy. My own exploration of the testimonies given by women in both urban and rural areas of Bangladesh as to how they perceived, and acted on, their access to new economic resources, revealed diversity, rather than uniformity, in how women explained their choices (Kabeer 1997a, 1998). Some actively and explicitly rejected attempts by patriarchal authority within the family to constrain their behaviour. Others contested *official* interpretations of these constraints, those put forward by dominant sections of the community, and sought to redefine them to accommodate desired forms of agency. However, there were also those who did not merely acquiesce with the lesser value they had been assigned by their community, but believed it to be justified on the grounds of biological difference/inferiority, by divine ordination or more simply “because that is how it has always been”. Similarly, Shaffer (1998) found that while both women and men in his Guinea study identified women’s heavy workloads as well as male domination as major sources of gender disadvantage, neither considered this to be *unjust*.

Clearly, no research can adequately uncover, or even know whether it has uncovered, what people “truly” believe as opposed to what they say they believe. But we cannot rule out the possibility that “choosing not to choose” may not just be “strategic compliance” on the part of women. The vocabulary of “false consciousness” is not helpful here, implying as it does the need to adjudicate between false and authentic consciousness, between illusion and reality.



Consciousness can never be “false” as such, since how people perceive their needs and interests is shaped by individual histories and everyday realities, by the material and social contexts of their experiences, and by the vantage point for reflexivity this provides. In any situation, some of these needs and interests are self-evident, emerging out of the routine practices of daily life. They reflect practical concerns and are gender differentiated in as much as the responsibilities and routines of daily life are gender differentiated. However, there are other strategic interests that do not have this self-evident nature because they derive from a “deeper” level of reality, one not evident in everyday life because it is inscribed in the taken-for-granted rules, norms and customs within which everyday life is conducted.

One way of conceptualizing this deeper reality is to be found in Bourdieu's idea of “*doxa*”, aspects of tradition and culture that are taken for granted to such an extent that they are “naturalized”. *Doxa* refers to traditions and beliefs that exist beyond discourse or argumentation, “undiscussed, unnamed, admitted without argument or scrutiny” (Bourdieu 1977). The idea of *doxa* is particularly helpful in moving us away from the false/authentic dichotomy in understanding consciousness to a focus on the possibility for apprehending differing levels of reality. Bourdieu makes the point that as long as the subjective assessments of social actors are largely congruent with the objectively organized possibilities available to them, the world of *doxa* remains intact, a self-evident “common sense” about the world that is validated in the objective consensus of the way that world is. The passage from *doxa* to discourse, a more critical consciousness, only becomes possible when *competing* ways of being and doing emerge as material and cultural possibilities, so that common sense propositions of culture begin to lose their naturalized character, revealing the underlying arbitrariness of the given social order.

The availability of alternatives at the discursive level—of being able to have chosen differently or at least being able to imagine such a possibility—is thus crucial to the emergence of a critical consciousness, to the process by which people move from a position of unquestioning acceptance of the social order to a critical, and perhaps transformatory, perspective on it. But the process is always uneven in any given context because people come to specific points in their lives through very different histories and hence bring very different material standpoints and discursive potentials to their present situation. How does this relate to the earlier discussion about functioning achievements as an aspect of empowerment? The possibility that power operates not only through constraints on people's ability to make choices, but also through their preferences and values, and hence the choices that they may make, appeared to pose a serious challenge to the basic equation made in this chapter between power and choice. However, it is possible to retain the equation by a further qualification of the notion of choice, extending the idea of alternatives discussed earlier—of the material possibility of having chosen differently—to encompass the existence of discursive alternatives. In assessing whether or not an achievement embodies meaningful choice, therefore, we have to ask ourselves whether other choices were materially or ideologically possible.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The relevance of both material as well as discursive alternatives appears in different forms in a number of analyses of power. Lukes (1974) refers to the absence of actual or imagined alternatives as a factor explaining the absence of protest to the injustices of an unequal order. Geuss (1981) suggests that knowledge about social life and the self requires not only freedom from basic want, but also the material and cultural possibility of experimentation, of trying out alternatives, the freedom to experience and to discuss the results of that experience.

### ***Dimensions, levels and processes of change***

Further elaboration of the main points of the discussion so far may help to clarify the direction of the argument of this chapter. The ability to choose has been made central to the concept of power that informs the analysis here, but the notion of choice has been qualified in a number of ways to make it relevant to the analysis of empowerment. One set of qualifications refers to the *conditions of choice* in order to distinguish between choices made from the vantage point of alternatives and those reflecting the absence, or punishingly high cost, of alternatives. Another set of qualifications refers to the *consequences of choice* and sought to distinguish between first-order choices—those critical in allowing women to live the kinds of lives they want—and the other, less strategic choices that follow once these first-order choices have been made. A further qualification relates to *transformatory significance*, distinguishing between choices with the potential for challenging and destabilizing social inequalities and those that essentially express and reproduce these inequalities. Choices that express the fundamental inequalities of a society, infringing on the basic rights of others or systematically devaluing the self, are not compatible with the notion of “empowerment” put forward in this chapter.

While most of the measures of empowerment found in the literature reviewed for this chapter are defined at the level of the individual, the preceding analysis points to the structural roots of individual inequalities of power. The qualifications made to the notion of choice in the present analysis represent an attempt to acknowledge these underlying structures for the exercise of choice, since these structures constitute the conditions under which choices are made as well as their consequential significance. Inequalities in structural conditions determine the distribution of valued resources between different categories of members in any society along gender, class, caste and other lines. They also impose socially differentiated parameters within which different categories of actors are able pursue their interests, promoting the voice and agency of some actors and inhibiting those of others. And finally, they shape individual interests so that how people define their goals and what they value reflect their social positioning as well as their individual histories, tastes and preferences.

This suggests that processes of empowerment entail change at different levels and in different dimensions: change can occur at the level of the individual, in their “inner” sense of self or in their access to material resources; it can occur in relationships within the family and household; or it can reflect alteration in position in the wider hierarchies of the economy and state. The complex of causal factors resulting in the denial of choice to women in terms of these different levels can be conceptualized as follows:

“Deeper” level	Structural relations of class/caste/gender
Intermediate level	Distribution of rules and resources
Immediate level	Individual agency and achievements

The different measures of empowerment reviewed in this chapter are drawn from the development studies literature, particularly from contributions to economics and population studies, as well as by feminist interventions in the field. There are some important differences in how these contributions deal with the idea of empowerment. They differ in the dimensions of empowerment that they choose to focus on. They differ also in whether power is regarded as an attribute of individuals or a property of structures. Finally, they differ in how change, which is of course at the heart of empowerment, is perceived, some opting for a linear cause-effect model, others favouring a more process-based approach.

While many neoclassical economists have moved away from the earlier notion of the household as a unified, welfare-maximizing entity—in order to allow for inequalities in decision-making power within the household—they nevertheless retain a methodological individualism in their approach. Power is introduced into their model of the household through the idea of differences in “bargaining power” among household members, where bargaining power is seen to be a function of their “fall-back” positions or the relative resources they are able to command independently of other household members. Neoclassical economists thus generally subscribe to a resource model of power where the resources in question are largely the conventional economic ones of earnings, assets, credit and access to education.<sup>6</sup> They also subscribe to the linear model of change. The strengthening of women’s fall-back position through, for instance, an increase in their earning capacity is seen to translate fairly unproblematically into their greater bargaining power within the household, as demonstrated by the greater weight given to their preferences in decision making.<sup>7</sup>

Within population studies, there has been a shift from the earlier focus on a “roles and status” framework, derived from the modernization paradigm, to a greater concern with kinship and gender relations, the extent to which reproductive gender interests among family members are convergent or divergent, and the ability of women to pursue reproductive strategies that maximize their own interests.<sup>8</sup> While reproductive gender interests vary according to the distribution of costs and benefits of children between different family members, women are seen to have a strong gender-specific stake in lower fertility rates because of the costs that frequent child bearing imposes on their health, choices and, often, their lives. However, as long as their ability to act as independent agents is curtailed, their interests are best served by strengthening their familial networks through having a large number of children.

Empowerment is captured in this literature largely through the idea of autonomy, and the aim in much of it has been to explore associations between the “degrees of autonomy” permitted to women in different contexts and a variety of demographic outcomes. While a few studies recognize the possibility of multiple pathways through which changes in autonomy might occur, most tend to work with a fairly straightforward “cause-and-effect” model of change, with changes in structural variables determining changes in individual autonomy. Proxies for women’s empowerment in these studies include the conventional “status” variables of women’s education and employment, as well as a host of family and kinship variables also believed to play a role in defining autonomy: marital practices, such as patterns of post-marital residence and prevalence of polygamy; female mobility in the public domain; the ability to inherit or otherwise acquire, retain and dispose of property; and norms determining the continuity or disruption of relationships between married women and their natal kin. The discipline of population studies thus takes greater account of structures than does economics, and a number of studies discussed in this chapter attempt explicitly to disentangle individual and structural dimensions of women’s empowerment.

Explicitly feminist concerns with empowerment stem from the recognition that, in all societies, women have been denied choice to a far greater extent than men for any

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<sup>6</sup> More recently, however, some structural variables are beginning to find their way into economic models (see McElroy 1992).

<sup>7</sup> See Hart 1995 for an overview of this literature.

<sup>8</sup> See Kabeer 1997b for an overview of this literature.

given social group and have consequently had less say in strategic areas of their lives. Feminist scholars have played an important role in pointing to the institutionalized nature of gender inequality within the household, family and community as well as within the apparently gender-neutral domains of markets, the state and civil society. Feminist concerns with empowerment have translated into a variety of practical interventions. Within the official development agencies, interventions have included the adoption of mechanisms and training to ensure the “mainstreaming” of gender issues. Outside the official agencies, feminists have engaged in a variety of organizational strategies to address different manifestations of women’s disempowerment: lobbying around women’s rights, literacy and health projects; awareness raising and conscientization; campaigns for legal reform; and dealing with violence against women.

While these disparate efforts are characterized by a diversity of theoretical frameworks, political standpoints and methodological approaches, they all stem from a recognition of gender equity as central to the feminist goal of social transformation. Some of the commonalities—and differences—in the understanding of empowerment can be illustrated by considering the following empowerment-related definitions drawn from the feminist literature:

[T]he analysis of women’s subordination and...the formulation of an alternative, more satisfactory set of arrangements to those which exist...such as the abolition of the sexual division of labor, the alleviation of the burden of domestic labor and child care, the removal of institutionalized forms of discrimination, the establishment of political equality, freedom of choice over childbearing and...measures against male violence and control over women. (Molyneux 1985:232–233)

Women’s empowerment involves gaining a voice, having mobility and establishing a public presence. Although women can empower themselves by obtaining some form of control over different aspects of their daily lives, empowerment also suggests the need to gain some control over power structures, or to change them. (Johnson 1994:148)

Our main objective is to reverse these processes by empowering the poorest rural women with the freedom and knowledge with which to determine their own destinies. A ‘time and space’ is created for them to gather together and engage in a process of collective reflection, analysis, learning, and action, defining their own needs and priorities. (Mahila Samakhya 1996)

[T]he exercise of informed choice within an expanding framework of information, knowledge and analysis...a process which must enable women to discover new possibilities, new options...a growing repertoire of choices...to independently struggle for changes in their material conditions of existence, their personal lives and their treatment in the public sphere. ...The process of challenging existing power relations, and of gaining greater control over the sources of power. (Batliwala 1993:7, 1994:130)

What is apparent from these definitions is that feminist discourses of empowerment are constructed around a cluster of recurring concepts: power, capability, rights, interests, choices, control. They place a great deal of emphasis on the significance of intangible “resources”—voice, public presence, internal strength and confidence, collective organization, reflection and analytical skills, information, political participation and knowledge. And they are concerned with change at different levels and in different domains: at the level of individual and of social structures and within the intimate domain of the family, as well as in the public domain.

However, in the very nature of empowerment, understood in these terms, is a certain “fuzziness”, with a number of issues remaining unspecified or only sketchily understood. The role of men in the processes of women’s empowerment is one. As we will see, women’s relationships with men, the need for men to change in the course of

women's empowerment, barely figure in mainstream attempts to measure empowerment. It occupies more space in some of the feminist literature, but here too the complexity of the relationship is acknowledged. As Batliwala points out, many feminists recognize that poor men are almost as powerless as poor women in access to material resources in the public domain, but remain privileged within the patriarchal structures of the family: "the family is the last frontier of change in gender relations...You know (empowerment) has occurred when it crosses the threshold of the home" (Kannabiran cited in Batliwala 1994:131). Batliwala concludes that men stand to gain as well as lose from women's empowerment. "Women's empowerment means the loss of the privileged position that patriarchy allotted to men...however...women's empowerment also liberates and empowers men, both in material and psychological terms...they find that they have lost not merely traditional privileges, but also traditional burdens" (1994:131).

The other unresolved question relates to the processes of social change entailed in empowerment. Feminists have stressed changes at the level of individual consciousness and everyday lives, as well as changes in the overarching structures of women's subordination, such as the abolition of gender divisions of labour, the recognition of women's full citizenship, equality in property rights, and so on. What remains unresolved is how these different levels of change relate to one another. While structural models embody a vision of a more just society, they spell out "ends" that can only be achieved through the long-term transformation of some of the most stable constructs of women's subordination. Given the resilience of these larger structures, changes at the level of the individual—in consciousness and sense of self, in "voice" within the family, in control over individual resources—may be easier to achieve in the short term. What remains unresolved, and is perhaps impossible to resolve, is the relationship between individual and structural change. How do changes in the rules of women's representation in parliament, for instance, translate into the greater political agency of women at the grassroots level? Or, alternatively, how does change at the level of individual consciousness transform into a demand for greater political representation? It is this indeterminacy at the heart of feminist understandings of empowerment that explains why many feminists have opted for a non-linear and "fuzzy" model of social change in their approach, one that avoids prescribing specific outcomes and processes over others and concentrates instead on creating the possibilities that will allow women to exercise greater agency and choice in their lives and, perhaps, shape the direction of future change. Different aspects of women's disempowerment, and hence empowerment, are closely related so that initiatives in relation to one aspect are likely to set off changes in other aspects, although not in easily predictable ways. Changes at the level of resources may translate into changes in the sense of self-worth; a space for critical reflection may be the first step to building greater political participation; a campaign to close the gender gap in education at the state level may affect intrahousehold negotiations on these questions. The indeterminacy of the processes of empowerment, the intangibility of many of the elements central in bringing it about, increasing attention to the resistance and opportunities that men can offer in the project for women's empowerment, and insistence that empowerment must be self-generated rather than "given" are some of the features that distinguish this view of empowerment from those underpinning other attempts to measure empowerment discussed in this chapter.

## Measuring Empowerment: The Problem of Meaning

### Measuring “resources”

The “resource” dimension of empowerment would seem to be the most amenable to measurement. However, various efforts to measure resources suggest that the task is by no means simple, even when resources are defined in narrow material terms. The problem of measurement is disguised by a widespread tendency in the empowerment literature to talk about “access to resources” in a generic way, as if evoking a particular resource in relation to women automatically specifies their relationship to the resource in question, and hence to the choices it makes possible. In reality, however, resources are removed from choice; they are a measure of *potential* rather than *actualized* choice. Furthermore, “access” to land, to credit, to waged employment, to education or to social capital embodies very different potentials for the actualization of choice: the effects on women’s agency of access to land are very different from access to education and the effects of their access to waged employment very different from access to self-employment. To be useful as a measure of empowerment, the “resource” dimension has to be defined in a way that spells out its potential for human agency and valued achievements more clearly than simple “access” indicators generally do. This is not always easy precisely because of the indeterminacy in processes of empowerment discussed earlier.

Let us take the example of women’s access to land. At the systemic level, this is often captured by distinguishing between different inheritance principles, on the assumption that women are likely to exercise a greater degree of autonomy in those regions where they enjoy some rights to land (see Dyson and Moore 1983; Boserup 1970). Yet studies that use measures of women’s access to land as an indicator of empowerment rarely consider the pathways by which such “access” translates into agency and achievement. It is noteworthy, for instance, that while the northern plains of the Indian subcontinent are generally characterized as a region of low female autonomy, customary inheritance rules are by no means uniform within this region. There are important differences between Hindu and Muslim communities within India itself, as well as across the subcontinent. Among Hindus, joint family property is a central tenet shaping inheritance practices, although there are local variations in how this is interpreted. Such property is generally held in a coparcenary system by men, usually fathers and sons, to the total exclusion of women (Mukhopadhyay 1998). Among Muslims, on the other hand, women have always enjoyed the right to inherit property and to inherit as individuals. Muslim women and men consequently enjoy individual, absolute but unequal rights to property: men tend to inherit twice the share of women. Hindu law was reformed after Indian independence to give men and women equal rights of inheritance. The reform of personal law in India applies only to the majority Hindu community so that Muslim inheritance principles remain intact.

However, despite these differences in the customary and legal positions of women in the two communities, both Muslim and Hindu women tend to be treated as effectively propertyless in the literature. For Hindu women, older norms and customs remain powerful, and Agarwal (1994) provides evidence of the difficulties faced when they seek to assert legal over customary practices around land inheritance. Muslim women, on the other hand, generally prefer, or are encouraged to prefer, to waive their rights to parental property in favour of their brothers with the result that they, too, are treated as effectively propertyless. Thus the critical measure of women’s access to land characterizing the

literature is de facto rather than de jure entitlement, and by this measure, there is little difference between the Hindu and Muslim communities.

Yet it is by no means self-evident that de facto ownership tells us all we need to know about potentials in terms of choice. It has, for instance, been pointed out that although Muslim women do waive their land rights to their brothers (and may be under considerable pressure to do so), this strengthens a woman's future claim on her brother, should the woman's marriage break down. While brothers have a duty under Islam to look after their sisters, the waiving of land rights by sisters in favour of brothers gives a material basis to a moral entitlement. The necessity for such an exchange may reflect women's subordinate status within the community, but the fact that women's land rights are, in principle, recognized by their community gives them a resource to bargain with in situations where they have few other resources. Moreover, as the situation changes, they may begin to press their claims on this resource. There is evidence of women beginning to claim their inheritance rights in rural Bangladesh, although sometimes this is done under pressure from their husbands (Kabeer 1994). And Razavi notes evidence in rural Iran of a greater willingness of women to press for their property rights in court, often to compensate for their diminishing employment opportunities (Razavi 1992). These potentials are not easily available to women in communities where such rights were not recognized by customary law and tradition, even if they have, as in India, subsequently been brought into existence by legislative action. Indeed, Das Gupta has pointed out in the context of her study in the *jat* kinship system in Punjab that there was no question of women owning land: "If she should insist on her right to inherit land equally under the civil law, she would stand a good chance of being murdered" (1987:92).

Studies in West Bengal suggest that there may be differences in women's sense of entitlement to land as a result of differences in the cultural construction of their land rights within their communities. For instance, Das Gupta (1987) notes differences in the reactions of Hindu and Muslim women to the campaign by women's organizations in West Bengal to secure women equal rights in the land redistribution programme being undertaken by the state's socialist government. She found that Muslim women were much more likely to formulate their demands for equality in terms of *individual* property rights, while Hindu women were more likely to press for *joint* entitlement with their husbands.<sup>9</sup> Other differences are highlighted in Mukhopadhyay's study of legal disputes over property in West Bengal (1998). She reports that Muslim women generally had no trouble establishing their individual rights to property, going to court to contest fraudulent dispossession. For Hindu women, on the other hand, the problem lay in establishing their rightful claim to the property—a problem that reflects the ambiguity of their status within local interpretations of customary Hindu law as well as the way in which this ambiguity has been carried over into the new legislation.

One of the limitations of de facto measures of property is that they ignore the diverse processes by which the de facto possession or dispossession occurs, and may thus fail to appreciate important differences in women's choices implied by differences in the de jure position. However, the power of *customary* constructions of de jure rights over recently introduced legal ones raises the question of how changes in deeply entrenched rules, legitimized in this case by custom and religion, translate into changes in individual agency and choice. The recognition by many analysts of the need to go beyond simple

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<sup>9</sup> Personal communication, Jayathi Gupta.

“access” indicators in order to grasp how “resources” translate into realized achievements has led to a variety of concepts that seek to bridge the gap between formal and effective entitlement to resources. The most common is the widely used distinction between “access” and “control”. However, the distinction is not always clear or consistent.

Sathar and Kazi (1997) equate both “access” and “control” with “say in decision making”. Measures of “access to household resources” are based on whether women have a say in household expenses, cash to spend on household expenses and freedom to purchase clothes, jewellery and gifts for their relatives, while “control” measures are based on asking who kept household earnings and who had a say in household expenditure. In Jejeebhoy’s (1997) analysis, concepts of “access”, “control” and “decision making” are all used in relation to resources, but again the distinction between the terms is not clear. “Control” appears to refer to ownership of resources in some cases and to decision making in relation to resources in others. Thus, ownership relates to material resources, such as land, vessels and jewellery, as well as to own savings. But material resources are also brought into the analysis through a focus on “decision making” in relation to purchasing power, as well as through “access”, where access to household income relates to having a say in how it is spent. In Kishor’s (1997) analysis, empowerment is defined in terms of women’s “control” over key aspects of their lives—defined in relation to resources (earnings and expenditures), self-reliance (can women support themselves without their husband’s support), decision making (who has final say in making decisions about a variety of issues) and “choice” (choosing own spouse or being consulted in the choice of marriage partner).

The introduction of the notion of “control” into the discussion about resources is an important step in the empowerment literature, reflecting the recognition by many analysts that “access” to resources will only translate into empowerment if women are able to act on these resources in some definitive way. The concept of control is thus an attempt to bring the “passive” formulation of the resource dimension closer to a concern with women’s agency. But the meaning of “control” must be clearly and consistently worked out before it can be used as an indicator of empowerment. The main methodological point to draw out of this discussion, therefore, is that a key criterion for assessing the validity of a resource-based measure of women’s empowerment is *the validity of its assumptions about the kinds of agency and choices that women are able to exercise as a result of their “access” to the resource in question.*

### **Measuring “agency”**

A number of different indicators of agency are to be found in the literature, but one that appears most frequently relates to *decision-making agency*. These indicators are usually based on women’s responses to questions about their role in specific decisions. Answers may be combined into a single index or presented separately. Some examples of the typical decisions asked about in studies covering Bangladesh, Egypt, India, Iran, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan and Zimbabwe are given below.



### Typical decisions in decision-making indicators

- *Bangladesh*: ability to make small consumer purchases; ability to make large consumer purchases; house repair; taking in livestock for raising; leasing of land; purchase of major asset (Hashemi et al. 1996).
- *Bangladesh*: children's education; visits to friends and relatives; household purchases; health care matters (Cleland et al. 1994).
- *Egypt*: household budget; food cooked; visits; children's education; children's health; use of family planning methods (Kishor 1997).
- *India*: purchase of food; purchase of major household goods; purchase of small items of jewellery; course of action if child falls ill; disciplining the child; decisions about children's education and type of school (Jejeebhoy 1997).
- *Iran*: types and quantities of food; inputs; labour and sale in agricultural production (Razavi 1992).
- *Nepal*: what food to buy; decision by women to work outside; major market transactions; number of children to have (Morgan and Niraula 1995).
- *Nigeria*: household purchases; whether wife works; how to spend husband's income; number of children to have; whether to buy and sell land; whether to use family planning; whether to send children to school/how much education; when sons and when daughters marry; whether to take sick children to doctor; how to rear children (Kritz et al. 1997).
- *Pakistan*: purchase of food; number of children; schooling of children; children's marriage; major household purchases; women's work outside the home; sale and purchase of livestock; household expenses; purchase of clothes; jewellery and gifts for wife's relatives (Sathar and Kazi 1997).
- *Zimbabwe*: wife working outside; making a major purchase; number of children (Becker 1997).

Even a preliminary reading of these different decisions suggests that they are not all equally persuasive as indicators of women's autonomy, because not all have the same consequential significance for women's lives. Few cultures operate with starkly dichotomized distributions of power, with men making all the decisions and women making none. It is more common to find a hierarchy of decision-making responsibilities recognized by the family and community, where certain areas are reserved for men in their capacity as heads of households and others assigned to women in their capacity as mothers, wives, daughters and so on. Broadly speaking, the evidence from studies in South Asia suggest that, within the family, the purchase of food and other items of household consumption, as well as decisions related to children's health, appear to fall within women's arena of decision making, while decisions related to education and marriage of children, and market transactions in major assets, tend to be more clearly male.<sup>10</sup>

This is clearly illustrated in Sathar and Kazi (1997). They found, on the basis of data from Pakistan, that the only area of decision making in which women reported both participating (71 per cent) and playing a major role (51 per cent) was in decisions related to the purchase of food. They participated in, but did not play a major role in deciding, the number of children to have (65 per cent and 16 per cent respectively), the schooling of children (53 per cent and 17 per cent) and the marriage of children (52 per cent and 8 per cent). They had lower levels of participation and even less likelihood of playing a major role in decisions relating to major household purchases (17 per cent and 5 per cent) and livestock transactions (21 per cent and 5 per cent). Thus major economic

<sup>10</sup> Sathar and Kazi 1997; Cleland et al. 1994; Morgan and Niraula 1995; Hashemi et al. 1996.

decisions were largely reserved for men, while women could play a more significant role in minor economic decisions. They participated, but did not have a major role, in decisions relating to numbers of children and their schooling. They had an even less decisive role when it came to children's marriage.

Sathar and Kazi's (1997) study serves to highlight the fact that decision-making hierarchies occur not only between different categories of decisions, but also between degrees of involvement in the same decision. For example, they found that while 65 per cent of women reported that they had participated in decision making about how many children to have, only 16 per cent of those who did not want any more children were using contraceptives. This signals the importance of distinguishing between "participating in" and "having a major say in" decisions. Still other studies (Benería and Roldán 1987) point to various critical "control points" within decision-making processes where such control is defined in terms of the consequential significance of influencing outcomes at these different points. Pahl (1989) distinguishes between the "control" or policy-making function, decisions about resource allocation, and the "management" function, decisions pertaining to implementation. This distinction might explain the finding by the Egyptian Male Survey in 1992 (cited in Ali 1996) that men were dominant in the decision to adopt contraceptives, the policy decision, but tended to leave the choice of contraception largely to women (although Ali's qualitative study found men's continuing involvement in women's choice of contraceptives as well).

In methodological terms, these distinctions suggest the need for greater care in selecting and quantifying the decisions that are to serve as indicators of empowerment, *with attention given to the consequential significance of areas of decision making or of different stages in the decision-making process*. Evidence that women played a role in making decisions that were of little consequence—or were assigned to women in any case by virtue of their pre-existing roles and responsibilities—tells us far less about their power to choose than does evidence on decisions relating to their critical life choices or to choices they had been denied in the past. However, "statistical" perspectives on decision making should be remembered for what they are: simple windows on complex realities. They may provide a brief glimpse of processes of decision making, but they tell us very little about the subtle negotiations that go on between women and men in their private lives. Consequently, they may underestimate the informal decision-making agency that women often exercise. This can be illustrated by comparing Silberschmidt's (1992) ethnographic account of formal and informal decision making among the Kisii in Kenya. The formal account of decision making given by women ascribed most of the power to men: The husbands were said to be "heads" of households and their "owners"—as an afterthought the wives might add, "they can buy us just like cattle". At the same time, however, accounts of "actual" decision making gave a very different picture:

[Women] admitted that men should be consulted on all sorts of issues, and that they were supposed to determine various actions that must be taken. In reality, however, many women took such decisions themselves. Their most common practice was to avoid open confrontation while still getting their own way...There is no doubt that many women do often manipulate their menfolk and make decisions independently. For example, since the land belongs to the man, he is expected to decide where the various crops are to be planted. If his wife disagrees, she would seldom say so, but simply plant in what she feels is a better way. If he finds out that she has not followed his instructions, she will apologize but explain that because the seeds did not germinate they had to be replanted in a different manner/spot. (Silberschmidt 1992:248)

Studies measuring women's control over resources tend to focus on who makes decisions about the disposal of those resources. But my own exploration of these questions in relation to women's access to credit, as well as waged employment, in Bangladesh suggest that information on the decision to access these resources in the first place reveals insights into women's agency and priorities in a way that exclusive attention to allocative decision making does not (Kabeer 1997a, 1998). Accessing credit or waged employment was important for many women because of the potential such resources opened up for them. Knowledge of this potential was often sufficient to enhance women's voice within the household, since all members knew that women's fall-back position had been strengthened. Struggles over "actual control" tended to occur primarily in conflictual relationships.

A second common measure of women's agency is their *mobility in the public domain*, but it crops up largely in contexts where there is a strong public-private divide along gender lines and women's mobility in the public sphere is subject to various socially defined restrictions. Mobility indicators generally ask whether it is acceptable for women to move around on their own in certain pre-identified locations. Some typical locations used in these studies are summarized below.

#### Typical locations in mobility indicators

- *Bangladesh*: market; medical facility; cinema; outside village (Hashemi et al. 1996).
- *Egypt*: just outside the house; local market; health centre; neighbourhood; homes of friends and family (Kishor 1997).
- *India*: market; health centre; home of friend or relative; fair; next village (Jejeebhoy 1997).
- *Nepal*: local health centre; local market; homes of relatives; fields outside the village; community centre; fair or shrine; next village; cinema (Morgan and Niraula 1995).
- *Pakistan*: homes of relatives; fields; market; health centre; neighbouring village (Sathar and Kazi 1997).

The findings from these studies suggest that, like decision-making power, space is not a dichotomous variable, divided between public and private, but rather a continuum of locations ranging from acceptable to unacceptable places for unaccompanied women to be. For instance, as suggested by the findings from Morgan and Niraula's (1995) study of two villages in Nepal (table 15.1), women had much greater freedom of movement in one of the study villages than in the other, but there were certain locations in both villages where women were less likely to appear on their own; these related to certain kinds of public activity (cinema, fairs, shrines and community centres) or were outside the boundaries of their village (fields and neighbouring villages). The local health centre, on other hand, appeared to be the most acceptable public place in both villages for women to visit on their own, perhaps because it was perceived as linked to their familial responsibilities. Jejeebhoy's study of Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh found that visiting the local health centre and visiting the homes of relatives or friends within the village were considered less threatening than visiting local fairs or adjoining villages.

In methodological terms, our analysis suggests *the need to distinguish between different locations on the basis of their consequential significance for women's ability to exercise choices versus their transformatory significance in terms of past practice*. A location can have consequential significance without necessarily having a transformatory significance. The reported ability to visit the health centre may have important consequences for women's well-being, but if

it is a widely accepted location for women to visit, it has little transformatory significance. On the other hand, women's ability to visit the cinema on their own may have little consequential significance. But in those parts of the world (such as much of the Indian subcontinent) where the cinema is a "male" space where it is unacceptable for women to visit, an important cultural transformation will have occurred in gender relations when this becomes routine. Awareness of such distinctions could improve both the use of women's mobility as a measure of their empowerment, as well as how the measure is interpreted.

**Table 15.1: Comparison of female mobility in public domain in two Nepalese villages**

	Village 1 (per cent)	Village 2 (per cent)
Local health centre	97	78
Relatives' homes	78	61
Local market	96	42
Fields outside village	51	19
Community centre	37	3
Fair/shrine	28	10
Next village	24	10
Cinema	8	3

**Source:** Based on Morgan and Niraula, 1995:552, table 2.

Finally, *male violence* is another agency-related indicator that features frequently in the literature on women's empowerment. It is generally seen as a direct expression of patriarchal power: men's ability to resort to physical force to impose their own goals or to block women's ability to achieve theirs. Although such violence is exercised by individual men against individual women in the context of interpersonal relationships, the structural support for male violence can be seen in the fact that it is often condoned by social or religious norms that give men the authority to "discipline" their wives on various grounds.

There is a clear rationale for seeking to quantify the incidence of domestic violence, if only because "naming and numbering" is an effective way of demonstrating the existence of a problem to policy makers. However, measurement of domestic violence is a problematic exercise, particularly in cultures and contexts where it is defined as a private matter, a source of shame. For instance, Naripokkho, a feminist organization that recently completed a large-scale quantitative study of domestic violence in urban Bangladesh, observed a clear class difference in women's willingness to talk to strangers about their experience (Naripokkho 2001).<sup>11</sup> Women in slum areas, where privacy is a luxury and everyone knows everyone else's business, regard violence as an unexceptional feature of marriage. They displayed far less hesitation in reporting it, although there was a tendency to underreport "acceptable" levels of violence, that is, beatings that they did not regard as major assaults. By contrast, women from middle-class backgrounds, who live their lives behind closed doors, were far less forthcoming.

<sup>11</sup> This study has since been finalized and published in 2001. The information here originally came from a personal communication with Safia Azim.

Although Naripokkho's research team was trained to ask questions with empathy and respect for those of a different class than themselves, they were well aware that their study was likely to underestimate the incidence of domestic violence, particularly for middle-class women. Less confidence can be attached to estimates of domestic violence based on the normal procedures of large-scale quantitative surveys. These require teams of strangers, not necessarily trained in dealing with sensitive issues, to walk into the homes of hundreds—sometimes thousands—of women and pose structured questions about intimate and shameful aspects of their lives. Such large-scale quantitative surveys often include questions such as (i) were women afraid of their husbands; (ii) were they beaten by their husbands; (iii) were they both afraid of *and* beaten by their husbands (Jejeebhoy 1997).

The methodological problems associated with quantifying a sensitive issue like domestic violence are noted by Schuler et al. (1996) in their investigation of the impact of credit for women in rural Bangladesh. They point out that their overall survey data gave much lower estimates of the incidence of male violence than did estimates from six villages selected for a two-year ethnographic study, during which the research team had built a rapport with the local community. Their findings are unusual in that they bring together quantitative indicators measuring the incidence of violence with ethnographic research into the meaning of violence.

Male violence was found to be widespread in their study villages, as it is in much of Bangladesh—and indeed, much of the world. However, it varied considerably from village to village and it occurred largely in the context of marriage. Women were beaten on a variety of pretexts: for giving birth to daughters rather than sons; for not performing their household chores to their husbands' satisfaction; for talking back when reprimanded; for urging their husbands to seek work or to stop gambling; for pointing to their husbands' failure to fulfil his role as provider; for asking for money for any expense, even medical expenses; and in relation to non-payment of dowry. Both men and women believed that men's right to beat their wives was grounded in religious doctrine, but women were also acutely aware of the price they might have to pay in resisting such violence, given their social and economic dependency on their husbands.

Quantitative data suggested that women who had sons were less likely to be beaten; older women were less likely to be beaten than women in their twenties or younger; women with some education were less likely to be beaten than women with no education (Schuler et al. 1996). These findings are consistent with the lower status of young wives who are relatively new in the husband's home, and with the strong son preference in Bangladesh. They also indicate a greater degree of assertiveness on the part of educated women—or perhaps a greater reluctance to report violence.<sup>12</sup> In terms of economic variables, the authors found that membership of credit programmes that lent to women tended to be associated with a reduced incidence of domestic violence: 9–13 per cent of women who were members of credit organizations reported male violence, compared to 21–27 per cent of women from a comparison group of households where women did not receive loans (Hashemi et al. 1996). In addition, in families where women were making relatively large contributions to the family economy, regardless of whether or not they had access to credit, violence was also found to be lower.

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<sup>12</sup> There is some indirect support for the former interpretation in the views expressed by a large number of women loanees interviewed in rural Bangladesh. One of their reasons for wanting to educate their daughters was to ensure that they would not be forced to marry abusive men (Kabeer 1998).

One important reason for this “credit” effect on violence was that women’s greater participation in social networks in the public domain (as a result of their membership of credit organizations) increased the possibility that incidents of domestic violence would become public knowledge, thereby bringing shame on the family. Other reasons were revealed in my qualitative study into the impact of loans to women in rural Bangladesh. The women all testified that poverty-related stress was a major source of male violence within the family, given that men carried primary and often sole responsibility for family breadwinning. Violence tended to lessen when women were able to make a significant direct contribution to the family economy or to make an indirect contribution by bringing in loans (Kabeer 1998).

Qualitative research by Schuler et al. revealed a number of examples where male violence appeared to have been exacerbated by women’s access to credit. A number of these examples remind us that men do not always take kindly to interventions that destabilize the balance of power within the household and that “empowerment processes may sometimes lead to an initial increase in abuse because they challenge the status quo of gender power” (Sen and Batliwala 1997:21). As Schuler et al. point out:

There were many cases in the study villages where husbands became increasingly violent as their wives began to earn independent incomes and became more mobile and autonomous. Conflicts often developed over the control of assets and earnings and the women became more inclined to defend themselves against what they saw as unfair domination. ...In contrast...many women who had nothing of their own, were completely dependent on their husbands and were rarely if ever beaten. (1998:151)

What lessons can we draw out for the use of male violence as an indicator in the measurement of women’s empowerment? Aside from the issue of empathy in asking questions about private, and often shameful, aspects of people’s lives,<sup>13</sup> such studies suggest that *estimates of male violence need to be embedded in an ethnographic understanding of what led to violence if we are to distinguish between cases where such violence was an assertion of male power in the absence of change, and those where it was an attempt to assert male power in response to changes in women’s agency*. Condemning violence against women does not rule out the need to understand the meaning of violence; and understanding the meaning of violence helps to take us beyond the automatic equation of male violence and female victimhood to a recognition of the fact that in some situations, male violence may be a response to women’s assertion of their rights.

### **Measuring the “achievement” dimension of empowerment**

As with the other dimensions of empowerment, analytical rigour must be exercised in the selection of the achievements to be measured. A number of studies that include measures of the achievement dimension illustrate this. Kishor (1997) used Egyptian data to explore the effects of direct, as well as indirect, measures of women’s empowerment on two valued functioning achievements: infant survival rates and infant immunization. Her selection of achievement outcomes was directly related to her

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<sup>13</sup> Carried out badly, surveys investigating violence against women within the home can be experienced as insensitive and intrusive. However, where interviewers have been trained in the skills of asking and listening to women’s accounts with sympathy and tact, the opportunity to share the experience can be one of relief for women who have been unable to discuss it with anyone else. The Naripokkho team found that they had seriously underestimated the length of time a feminist survey of domestic violence would take; questions that the pilot had suggested would take a few hours sometimes took a day, because of the need many women felt to talk about something they had hitherto been silent about (Naripokkho 1998).

conceptualization of women's empowerment in terms of control, an essential aspect of which, she suggested, was women's ability to "access information, take decisions, and act in their own interests, or the interests of those who depend on them" (1997:1). Since women bear primary responsibility for children's health, it followed that women's empowerment was likely to be associated with positive achievements in terms of the health and survival of their children.

Her empowerment indicators were constructed by using factor analysis to collapse 30 alternative, but overlapping, measures of empowerment into 10 non-overlapping factors. These variables were then classified into three categories: direct evidence of empowerment, sources of empowerment and the setting for empowerment. Direct measures attempted to capture "control" through various indicators of agency and choice. The other two were less direct, "background" variables related to access to resources and marriage practices. In order to provide some insight into the meanings compressed within her composite empowerment indicators, they are summarized below, together with the two constituent variables most closely correlated with each indicator.

**Direct evidence of empowerment:**

- Devaluation of women: reports of being beaten; dowry paid at marriage.
- Women's emancipation: belief in daughters' education; freedom of movement.
- Reported sharing of roles and decision making: egalitarian gender roles; egalitarian decision making.
- Equality in marriage: fewer grounds reported for justified divorce by husbands; equality of grounds reported for divorce by husband or wife.
- Financial autonomy: currently controls her earnings; her earnings as shared household income.

**Sources of empowerment:**

- Participation in the modern sector: index of assets owned; female education.
- Lifetime exposure to employment: worked before marriage; controlled earnings before marriage.

**Setting indicators:**

- Family structure amenable to empowerment: does not live and has not previously lived with in-laws.
- Marital advantage: small age difference between spouses; chose spouse.
- Traditional marriage: large educational difference with husband; chose husband.

Kishor (1997) used multivariate analysis to estimate the effects of these various measures of women's empowerment on her two achievement variables. The "empowerment" indicators that remained statistically significant after various locational (region and urban residence), socioeconomic (household possessions index and sanitation facilities) and demographic (woman's age, number of children, previous birth interval) variables had been controlled for are summarized below.

**Table 15.2: Statistically significant determinants of achievement variables** (signs indicate direction of association)

Determinants of child survival	Determinants of full immunization
<i>Evidence of empowerment:</i> None	<i>Evidence of empowerment:</i> Equality in marriage (+)
<i>Sources of empowerment:</i> Lifetime experience of employment (+)	<i>Sources of empowerment:</i> Lifetime experience of employment (+) Participation in modern sector (+)
<i>Setting conducive to empowerment:</i> Amenable family structures (+) Traditional marriage (-)	<i>Setting conducive to empowerment:</i> Amenable family structures (+) Marital advantage (+)

The results of her multivariate analysis were, first, that both infant survival and infant immunization were significantly affected by women’s empowerment but not necessarily by the same indicators and, second, that the source/setting or indirect indicators appeared to be far more influential in determining these outcomes than the direct measures of empowerment. The only direct empowerment indicator with any statistical significance was the “equality in marriage index”, an attitudinal variable that had a positive influence on the likelihood of infant immunization.

Two, not necessarily mutually exclusive, explanations might help make sense of Kishor’s findings. The first is that her direct indicators of empowerment did not succeed in capturing empowerment particularly well. This is not implausible. Many of the “direct evidence” indicators touch on attitudes and relationships within marriage and are likely to have elicited highly value-laden responses. For instance, women were asked questions about the grounds on which they believe that a husband is justified in divorcing his wife; if husband and wife are justified in seeking divorce on the same grounds; and whether women should speak up if they disagree with their husbands. However, other, more conventional, factual indicators also proved to be insignificant as determinants of the achievement variables. These included “financial autonomy”, which measured women’s current contribution to household earnings and the extent to which they controlled their earnings, and “freedom of movement”, which measured the public locations that women could visit on their own.

The second possible explanation for the results of the analysis is that the achievements in question did not in fact depend on whether or not women were “empowered”, but on other factors better captured by Kishor’s “source” and “setting” variables. This explanation suggests that improvements in functioning achievements within women’s pre-assigned sphere of jurisdiction may reflect improved efficacy in the performance of their roles without necessarily constituting evidence of empowerment as such. A further deconstruction of the findings of the multivariate analysis reported above supports this second possibility. It suggests that child mortality was higher in households where women were currently, or had previously been, in residence with their parents-in-law, as well as in households where there was a large difference in the age and education levels of husband and wife. However, child mortality rates were considerably improved if the mother had been in employment prior to her marriage. As far as immunization was concerned, children were more likely to have been immunized in households where their mothers had extended experience of employment, where they reported exposure to the media, where they were educated and where they were not under the authority of in-laws as a result of joint residence. In addition, where the age difference between husband and wife was small and where women expressed a belief in equality in marriage, children’s survival chances were likely to be better.



A plausible interpretation of these findings is that what mattered for achievements in relation to children's well-being was women's agency as *mothers* rather than as wives. This would explain why the direct measures of empowerment, which dealt largely with equality in conjugal relationships, proved largely insignificant in explaining the achievement variables. Instead, variables that captured women's ability to take effective action in relation to the welfare of their children played a far more significant role in the explanation. For instance, women who lived, or had lived, with their in-laws were more likely to have been subordinate to the authority of a senior female, with less likelihood of exercising effective agency at a time when such agency was critical to decision-making outcomes related to children's health. Women who were considerably less educated than their husbands or much younger were also likely to have been less confident, competent or authoritative in taking the necessary actions to ensure their children's health. Female education and employment both had a role in explaining child welfare outcomes, but with slight variations. Lifetime experience of employment by women had a direct positive effect on their children's chances of survival, as well as on the likelihood of child immunization. Female education, on the other hand, had a *direct* effect on the likelihood of child immunization but influenced children's survival chances indirectly through its association with improved standards of household water and sanitation.

It is possible that women's education and employment history, both significant for child well-being, were proxying women's competence in accessing information and resources relevant to their children's achievement and to negotiating with the outside world, in the form of public health providers, for instance. Caldwell (1979) has suggested this in relation to women's education and Jejeebhoy (1995) has summarized studies from contexts as varied as India, Indonesia, Mexico and Sri Lanka to suggest that better-educated women are more likely to know of available services, to use these services appropriately, to show greater self-confidence in dealing with officials and service providers and, equally importantly, to be taken seriously by their families and outsiders in their health-seeking behaviour. However, the findings do differentiate to some extent between the determinants of child immunization and child survival, suggesting differences in the agency underlying these achievements. The two outcomes are clearly interrelated, but the immunization of children does require a more active form of health-seeking behaviour on the part of the carer than the more routine forms of agency through which survival is assured. This may explain why child immunization was more directly associated than child survival with a number of "empowerment"-type indicators, such as women's education and the equality in marriage index.

The case for analytical clarity in the selection of "empowerment-related" measures of achievement can also be illustrated with reference to a study by Becker (1997), which used data from Zimbabwe to explore the implications of women's empowerment on two examples of functioning achievements: use of contraception and their use of prenatal health care. Becker used multiple regression analysis to explore the impact of a number of different possible determinants of these achievement outcomes. He then added measures of women's empowerment to his equations, where the measures related to women's role in decision making in three key areas: the purchase of household items, the decision to work outside and the number of children to have. He found that contraceptive use appeared to be positively related to household wealth, as measured by a possessions index, as well as to the number of surviving children, the wife's employment and husband's education. Older women, women who lived in rural areas and women who had polygamous husbands were less likely to use contraception. The likelihood that women

received prenatal care was positively related to household possessions; rural residence; women's age, education and employment; and husband's education. Adding his decision-making indicators did little to improve the fit of the equation in relation to contraceptive use, but significantly improved the fit as far as prenatal care was concerned.

Speculating on the meaning of these findings, Becker pointed out that, given the commitment of the Zimbabwean government to family planning, contraceptive services were widely available through community-based distribution systems and contraceptive prevalence was correspondingly high. Over 50 per cent of the women in his sample used it. In a context where contraception was easily available and had also become a relatively routine form of behaviour, women's employment status did increase the likelihood of use, but otherwise it did not appear to require any great assertiveness on the part of women to access the necessary services. By contrast, women's use of prenatal care was more closely related to their role in intrahousehold decision making as well as to both their education level and their employment status, suggesting that it may have required far greater assertiveness on the part of women than contraceptive use. In other words, women who were assertive in other areas of household decision making, who were educated and employed, were also more likely to be assertive when it came to active health-seeking behaviour on their own behalf.

The general methodological point to draw out of these studies is *the need to distinguish between functioning achievements that testify to women's greater efficacy as agents within prescribed gender roles and those that are indicative of women as agents of transformation*. In both studies discussed, direct measures of women's agency were far more significant in determining outcomes when women were required to step out of routine forms of behaviour: to get their children immunized, in one case, and to do prenatal health visits, in the other. However, in addition to achievements requiring women to go against the grain of established daily custom, achievements have to be assessed for their transformatory implications in relation to the gender inequalities frequently embedded in established routines. While both child survival and immunization are highly valued achievements from a variety of perspectives—of policy makers, of the family and, above all, of women themselves—and, while both are quite evidently brought about by women's greater and more effective agency, neither achievement by itself necessarily implied an improvement in women's ability to make strategic life choices or a shift in underlying power relations. Women's ability to access prenatal health care is more indicative of transformatory agency in this sense.

A similar distinction would apply, for instance, to the findings of a study by Drèze and Sen (1995) on the determinants of under-five child mortality and gender differentials in child mortality in India. They found that female literacy reduced under-five child mortality, while both female labour force participation and female literacy reduced excess female mortality in the under-five age group. They interpreted these favourable effects on child-related functionings as evidence that women's access to education and employment enhanced their ability to exercise agency. While accepting this interpretation, I would nevertheless argue that the meanings conveyed by the two functioning achievements carry different implications in terms of women's empowerment. The reduction in under-five mortality associated with women's access to education probably does represent more *effective* agency on the part of women but does not, by itself, testify to a *transformatory* agency on their part. On the other hand, the reduction in excess female mortality associated with higher levels of female education and employment does suggest something more than greater efficacy of agency. Given that the reduction in excess female

mortality represented an increase in the survival chances of the girl child rather than a decrease in the survival chances of boys, it suggests that women who have received some education and are economically active are more likely than others to give equal value to sons and daughters and to exercise equal effort on behalf of both.

Razavi's (1992) comparison of two villages in Iran—another part of the world characterized by excess female mortality—also found that in a context of rising prosperity and overall declines in child mortality, women's agency still mattered as far as gender differentials in mortality were concerned. Excess female mortality persisted, despite greater prosperity and declines in overall child mortality, in the area where women had withdrawn from the labour force in deference to *pardah* norms. However, it had disappeared in the region where women had high rates of economic activity and greater public mobility.

Our discussion therefore offers a further criterion for judging when the measurement of functioning achievements can be taken as an indicator of women's empowerment: *in situations of gender discrimination, evidence that the enhancement of women's agency led to a reduction in prevailing gender inequalities in functioning achievements can be taken as evidence of empowerment.* The fact that this may, as in Becker's (1997) study, entail agency on their own behalf is not intended to equate empowerment with self-interest.<sup>14</sup> But it is a recognition that, by and large, gender inequalities often mean that women's well-being is given a secondary place to that of men. In some contexts, this results in extreme and life-threatening forms of gender inequality. In others, it may take less life-threatening forms, such as gender inequality in education. In most contexts, it would be reasonable to assume that improvements in women's well-being are likely to imply improvements in the well-being of other family members, whereas improvements in the well-being of other family members do not necessarily imply improvements in women's well-being.

It is also worth noting the “enabling” effect of *male* education for both indicators of women's well-being in Becker's study. This effect suggests that women's ability to act on their own behalf may, in certain contexts, be significantly associated with the attitudes that men bring to the marriage. Although, there is little recognition of the role that men can play in the processes of women's empowerment in the quantitative literature, there is some scattered evidence to suggest that men's attitudes, as proxied by education, can be conducive to women's well-being and empowerment. Women's labour force participation in Bangladesh, for example, was found to be more closely associated with male education than with their own (Khandker 1988), while data from Ghana and Kenya suggest that male education was an important factor in lowering male reproductive goals and bringing them in closer to female goals.

The fairly consistent positive relationship between women's economic activity and measures of achievement in the four studies cited in this section is also noteworthy. Female education performed less consistently. In contexts as geographically dispersed as Egypt, India, Iran and Zimbabwe, women's role in household livelihood appeared to have played an important role in ensuring a variety of significant achievements, including the

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<sup>14</sup> I have taken evidence of contraceptive use in Becker's study as a positive functioning achievement. In fact, we would need to take account of the terms on which such contraceptives were offered before taking their use as evidence of empowerment. In one very basic sense, contraception offers women the possibility of “choice” rather than “chance” in the matter of childbearing, and hence holds out the promise of greater control over their own bodies and life chances. On the other hand, however, where powerful external agencies seek to promote population control goals, contraceptives are often provided on terms that violate the principle of reproductive choice.

achievement of higher rates of child survival and full immunization, reductions in gender disparities in child mortality and women's use of prenatal services and contraception. As we shall see, this relationship recurs in a variety of other studies as well, drawing attention to the need to take very seriously the significance of women's economic activity in strategies for women's empowerment.

### **Triangulation and Meaning: The Indivisibility of Resources, Agency and Achievements**

This review of the "fit" between different dimensions of empowerment and the different indicators used to measure them has essentially considered the "fit" between the meanings attributed to a measure and those empirically revealed by it. The discussion has revealed that it is not possible to establish the meaning of an indicator, whatever dimension of empowerment it is intended to measure, without reference to the other dimensions of empowerment. *In other words, the three dimensions are indivisible in determining the meaning of an indicator and hence its validity as a measure of empowerment.* The point was made above that specifying "access" to a resource tells us about potential rather than actual choice, thus the validity of a "resource" measure as an indicator of empowerment is largely determined by the validity of the assumptions made about the potential agency or entitlement embodied in that resource. It is similarly difficult to judge the validity of an achievement measure unless we have the evidence, or can make a reasonable guess, as to whose agency and what kind of agency was involved. Indicators of achievement must also distinguish between achievements that reinforce prevailing inequalities in resources and agency, and achievements that represent a challenge to them. And evidence on agency on its own tells us very little about the transformatory consequences of its exercise, or the conditions under which it was exercised.

The important methodological point brought out is *the critical need to triangulate or cross-check the evidence provided by an indicator in order to establish that it means what it is believed to mean.* Indicators compress not only a great deal of information into a single statistic, but also assumptions about what this information means. The more evidence there is to support these assumptions, the more faith we are likely to have in the validity of the indicator in question. In order to demonstrate the importance of triangulation for the interpretation of indicators, I want to compare how a number of evaluations of credit programmes for women in rural Bangladesh sought to quantify their empowerment potential, the conclusions they drew on the basis of their analysis and the plausibility of the evidence they provided in support of their interpretations.

The first of these studies typifies the neoclassical approach to analysis of power within the household. One of the characteristics of this approach is that it rarely contains direct information about agency, but rather seeks to infer it from the relationship between access to resources by individual members and the pattern of decision-making outcomes that results. In their study, Pitt and Khandker (1995) used multiple regression analysis to quantify the relationship between a number of "achievement" outcomes and gender of the loanee; they also included in their sample a control group of eligible households that had not received any loans. There was no direct measure of women's agency in their empirical analysis. Instead, gender roles in decision making were inferred from evidence on whether the achievement outcomes varied by the gender of the loanee. Based on this inferential approach, Pitt and Khandker (1995) concluded that targeted credit programmes

“empowered” women by leading to higher levels of overall consumption, increased hours in market-related production by women and increased value of assets in women’s name in those households where women had received access to loans.

The study’s highly sophisticated econometric model allowed the authors to control for the possibility that biases might have been introduced by the selective placement of credit programmes in particular villages or by the self-selecting nature of those who received loans. But the value of Pitt and Khandker’s (1995) analysis was undermined by the conceptual limitations of the notion of empowerment that they utilized. No clear-cut rationale was offered for the selection of particular achievement outcomes for the study, thus it was not always clear how to interpret its findings. The authors themselves throw no light on one of the findings they report, which appears to go against the grain of conventional wisdom in the population literature: that loans to men are far more likely to lead to a reduction in fertility levels than loans to women. Other findings are given ad hoc interpretations, most of which can be challenged by alternative, often contradictory and equally plausible views.

For instance, they interpret their finding that women loanees spent *more* time on market-related work than did women in male loanee households as evidence of women’s empowerment. But they explain as an “income effect” the finding that men in households that had received credit spent *less* time on market-related work, and probably more time on leisure, regardless of whether the loanee in question had been a male or a female. However, the increase in women’s market-related work as a result of their access to credit can be, and indeed has been, given a much more negative interpretation than that offered by others. It has been suggested that increases in women’s loan-generated labour may simply add to their increased work burdens, overwork, fatigue and malnutrition.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, men’s greater leisure as a result of loans to their household, regardless of who actually received the loan, could plausibly be interpreted as evidence of male privilege and power rather than (or as well as) an “income effect”. Finally, the finding that household consumption expenditure was significantly higher when the loan recipient was female may be indicative of an “empowering effect” or it may represent the effect suggested by Montgomery et al. that loans to women were “heavily compromised by the persisting responsibilities of women to cover the consumption needs of the family” (1996:168). In fact, the only finding reported by Pitt and Khandker that had a relatively unambiguous conceptual link with women’s empowerment was that women’s access to credit appeared to significantly increase their ownership of non-land assets, which could be interpreted as a strengthening of their fall-back position.

A similar absence of information on the agency involved in the achievement of particular decision-making outcomes characterizes one of the earliest studies to explore the impact of Grameen Bank loans to men and women (Rahman 1986). However, Rahman’s selection of “functioning achievements” have at least one advantage over those selected in Pitt and Khandker: they have a plausible bearing on women’s empowerment because they focus on gender differentials in basic welfare outcomes in a context characterized by considerable gender discrimination. She found that women who had received loans enjoyed higher levels of welfare (food, clothing and medical expenditure) compared to women in households where men had received loans or in economically equivalent households that had not received any loans at all. This welfare impact

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<sup>15</sup> Montgomery et al. 1996; Ackerly 1995; Goetz and Sen Gupta 1996.

persisted regardless of how women used their loans, but was likely to be higher where they had utilized some of the loan themselves, which the majority had done.

On the basis of Rahman's finding, we can say that women's access to credit had the effect of reducing, though not fully eliminating, gender differentials in intrahousehold welfare, and that it had certainly improved their welfare levels compared to women who had not received any loans. However, we do not know whose agency was involved in translating loans into impact, nor what the motivation was. Did increased expenditures on women's well-being represent the more active and direct exercise of purchasing power by women; did it represent their greater role in household decision making around the distribution of household resources; or did it represent the greater weight given by the household head to women's well-being in recognition of women's role in bringing in economic resources? Clearly, each possibility sheds a different light on the issue of power and agency within the household so that, while we can arrive at some firm conclusions about women's welfare as a result of their access to credit, a question remains about their empowerment.

If there are problems with inferring agency on the basis of information about achievements, attempts to infer achievement potential on the basis of very narrow interpretations of agency are equally problematic. In her study, Ackerly (1995) uses what she calls "accounting knowledge" as her indicator of women's empowerment, calculating it by adding up whether or not the female loanee knew about the price of inputs into the enterprise funded by her loans, the product yield of the enterprise and its profitability. A woman who was informed on all three counts was counted as empowered. However, while knowledgeability about prices and profits may be indicative of enterprise involvement, it does not, in and of itself, constitute evidence of "empowerment". It would have been more persuasive as an indicator if some attention had been paid to what such knowledge had allowed women to achieve in strategic decisions about their lives—in other words, its consequential significance.

Similar problems of interpretation dog Goetz and Sen Gupta's (1996) evaluation of the impact of credit. Their indicator of empowerment, which also focuses on enterprise involvement, was formulated as an index of "managerial control". At one end of the scale were women classified as having "little or no control" over their loans because they either had no knowledge of how their loans had been utilized or had played no part in the enterprise funded by their loans. At the other end of the scale were women who were described as exercising "full control" over their loans, having participated in all stages of the enterprise, including marketing of their products.

The large numbers of women, particularly married women, found to be exercising "little" or "no" control over their loans according to this criterion led the authors to extremely pessimistic conclusions about the empowerment potential of credit programmes for women. However, if we return to our earlier point about the hierarchy of decisions within decision-making processes, a major problem with the index of "managerial control" developed by Goetz and Sen Gupta (1996) is that it conflates quite distinct moments in the process by which access to loans translates into impact on women's lives. In particular, they conflate "control" and "management", making no distinction between the policy decision as to how loans were to be utilized and repaid, and the management decisions related to how to use the loans. If this distinction is taken into account, then apart from the unknown proportion of the 22 per cent of women in their "no control" category who reported that they did not even know how their loans were used, the remaining 78 per cent of women in their sample could, *in principle*, have

exercised much greater control over their loans than credited by the authors. What Goetz and Sen Gupta's (1996) study highlights is the point made earlier about the confusion surrounding the conceptualization of "control". Indeed, it suggests that attempts to measure "empowerment" by measuring "control" very often merely shift the burden of definition from one elusive concept to another.

Clearly, supportive information on who made decisions about loan use or the motivations involved would have helped to establish what their index of managerial control is actually measuring. Since this information was not sought, the authors have to confine themselves to speculating about possible reasons for loan transfer. However, if Pitt and Khandker (1995) tend to give an upbeat interpretation to most of their findings, Goetz and Sen Gupta draw more gloomy conclusions. The explanations "which suggest themselves" (1996:51) to the authors reinforce the overall pessimism of their analysis, conveying the impression that credit to women is either appropriated directly or indirectly by male family members, or is bargained away by women in return for "peace" within their marriage, the right to get fed and clothed, or to retain their membership of the credit organization in question.

Goetz and Sen Gupta's (1996) contribution to our understanding of the transformatory potential of women's access to credit is also limited by the dearth of information on the consequential significance of such access. If "managerial control" in loan-funded activity is seen as the critical "control" point in the process by which access to loans is translated into a range of valued achievements, then certainly an accurate measure of women's decision-making role in such activities can be taken as indicative of their agency and achievements in other aspects of their lives. This appears to be the interpretation favoured by the authors and explains their preoccupation with the likely negative consequences of women's loss of managerial control. However, this interpretation is directly contradicted by another evaluation of credit programmes in rural Bangladesh. Hashemi et al. (1996) classified all the women loanees in their sample according to the categories of "managerial control" developed by Goetz and Sen Gupta. While there was considerable variation in their results according to the length of women's membership of the credit organization, as well as by credit organization, they confirm that a large percentage of women in certain villages did "lose control" over their loans according to Goetz and Sen Gupta's criteria. By then going on to examine the relationship between women's access to loans, use of loans and a range of functioning achievements, Hashemi et al. are essentially asking whether women's access to credit can have any transformatory potential, regardless of who exercised "managerial control".

Their study compares empowerment measures for two broad groups of women: women who had received credit (from either BRAC or the Grameen Bank) and women from economically equivalent households who had not received any credit. Their empowerment indicators vary, with some more clearly indicative of women's agency and some of resources, including intangible resources. However, most of the measures could be argued to constitute valued achievements in themselves. They include magnitude of women's economic contribution to the family; mobility in a number of public locations; ability to make small and larger purchases, including purchases for themselves; involvement in major areas of economic decision making (land-related decisions or purchase of major assets); whether women had suffered appropriation of their money or any other asset; whether women had been prevented from visiting their natal home or from working outside; participation in public protests and campaigns; political and legal awareness; economic security (assets and savings in their own name). Finally, Hashemi et

al. construct a “composite” empowerment indicator based on positive scores on more than five of these eight measures.

Using logistical regression analysis, Hashemi et al. found that women’s access to credit contributed significantly to the magnitude of the economic contributions reported by women; to the likelihood of an increase in asset holdings in their own names, to an increase in their exercise of purchasing power, in their political and legal awareness as well as in the composite empowerment index. In addition, BRAC loanees tended to report significantly higher levels of mobility and higher levels of political participation, while Grameen members reported high involvement in “major decision making”. The study also explores the separate effects on the various empowerment indicators of women’s economic contribution to the household budget and their access to credit, and found that, while separating out the effects of women’s economic contribution reduced the impact of women’s access to credit, the independent impact of access to credit on the empowerment indicators remained significant. In other words, access to credit and the size of reported economic contributions were each *sufficient but not necessary* for the achievement of empowerment-related outcomes; together, their effects were mutually reinforcing.

This comparison of different approaches to the quantification of empowerment in the context of the same set of credit programmes is intended to illustrate the need for triangulation of evidence to ensure that indicators mean what they are intended to mean. The absence of such supportive evidence carries the danger that analysts will load meanings onto their indicators that reflect their own disciplinary, methodological or political leanings rather than the realities they are seeking to portray. Triangulation requires that multiple sources of information are brought to bear on the interpretation of an indicator rather than reliance on single source.

For example, study of a rather different credit programme to those covered in the preceding discussion allowed me to draw on women loanees’ own evaluations of the difference that credit had made to their lives to gauge the extent to which my findings supported or rejected the hypotheses suggested by some of the preceding evaluations of credit, as well as the more quantitative findings of my study (Kabeer 1998).<sup>16</sup> One set of competing hypotheses I was able to explore related to the evaluations of increased hours of market-related work by women as a result of access to credit. No evidence was found supporting the optimistic interpretation (offered by Pitt and Khandker) that such increases were indicative of women’s empowerment, or supporting the alternative interpretation by credit pessimists that it represented increased work burdens, overwork, fatigue and malnutrition for women.

However, the finding by Hashemi et al. (1996) that the magnitude of women’s economic contributions, itself linked to access to credit, had favourable implications for other aspects of their voice, agency and access to resources supports the more optimistic interpretation. My own qualitative findings confirm this more optimistic interpretation and also point to the need to differentiate the meanings that women invested in different uses of their time. While most women I interviewed reported an increase in the hours of work they did as a result of their access to credit-generated enterprise, they made a very important

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<sup>16</sup> Although the programme I studied was different in a number of ways, I suggest that the similarities and differences of my findings with those of the other evaluations I cite allow one to distinguish between findings accruing to credit per se and are similar regardless of the organization of credit delivery, and findings reflecting differences in programme design.



distinction between paid work, which increased household income, and the more traditional unpaid forms of family labour to which they gave far less value (Kabeer 1998).

In other words, we need to take cognisance of the value that women themselves attach to their role as economic actors rather than as unpaid family labour and how this perceived value can spill over into other forms of agency. The problem of intensified workloads, while applicable in many parts of the world, does not apply to the same degree in Bangladesh where poverty is often associated with enforced unemployment, particularly among women (Cain et al. 1979), and where discussions with women at both national and local levels reveal that the need for productive employment is their highest priority (Kabeer 1998; UNDP 1996).

A second set of competing hypotheses relates to consequential significance of different stages in the decision-making process by which access to credit was translated into valued achievements. Ackerly (1995), as well as Goetz and Sen Gupta (1996) identify entrepreneurial agency as the key indicator of women's empowerment, and the "marketing" aspect of entrepreneurial involvement as the most significant aspect of such agency. However, the studies by Hashemi et al. (1996) and Rahman (1986) suggest that enhanced agency within loan-funded enterprises was only one route by which women's access to loans translated into valued achievements. My own study (Kabeer 1998) suggested a number of critical points of decision making, along with managerial control and accounting responsibility, with implications for how women experienced loan impact: the decision to seek out a loan, whose idea it was and who participated in deciding; the decision as to how the loan was to be utilized and managed; decisions relating to the actual management of loan use; and, finally, decisions as to how profits yielded by the loan use were to be utilized. Each of these decisions, and how they were negotiated, provided important information on the exercise of agency by women and their potential for achieving valued goals.

The overall point to make on the basis of these findings is that access to credit translates into improvements in valued achievements through a number of routes, not all of them easily measurable. Some of these routes reflect access to a new material resource, while others reflect access to new experiences and social relationships. In addition to the improvements in women's own well-being, achievements included reduction in the incidence of domestic violence, perceived (as well as actual) economic contribution, strengthening of economic security, ability to exercise purchasing power and to invest in their children, and, in some cases, reducing the level of gender discrimination in children's schooling. All of these can be, and have been, measured. In addition, I found that women's ability to make an economic contribution and the sense of self-worth and value within their families that it gave them was an intangible but widely valued "achievement" associated with access to credit in a context where women have customarily been defined as economic dependants. In other words, I would support Sen's claim that what matters for women's ability to bargain for a better deal within their households and families is their *perceived* rather than their *actual* economic contribution. But I would add that women's *own* perceptions of their value within the family were as critical to their sense of empowerment as their perceived value by other family members. It is worth noting that women's sense of their own value was also linked to achievements that they were instrumental in assisting men in their families to make, a point that may be lost if the focus is solely on what women achieved for themselves. Thus one of the valued achievements that women reported as a result of their access to loans was not only

their own release from humiliating forms of waged work for others, but also that of husbands and sons.

## Measuring Empowerment: The Problem of Values

### **Status, autonomy and the relevance of context**

The discussion so far has focused on the importance of *meaning* in the selection of indicators of empowerment—in other words, the need to be sure that indicators mean what they are believed to mean. It now turns to the question of values and how they complicate attempts to conceptualize and measure women's empowerment. Emic or “insider” values will be considered first, before going on to consider the complicating effects of “outsider” values. Insider values have mainly been captured in studies of women's empowerment through variables measuring some aspect of “context”. Such studies tend to be comparative in nature and explore how differences in the context in which choices are made influence individual agency and achievements. The relevance of context for our understanding of empowerment will become clear in the discussion below.

In the study by Drèze and Sen (1995) cited earlier, women's literacy and employment status were found to help explain variations in overall child mortality and in excess female mortality among children across India. However, the single most important factor determining whether girl children had the same survival chances as boy children were dummy variables standing for geographical location: gender differentials in survival rates were far smaller in the southern states of India than in the northern states. A study by Agnihotri (1996) refines this division further, pointing to a triangle of extreme gender discrimination in the north/north-western region of India, encompassing parts of Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. Regional dummy variables in these studies compress information about a whole range of interrelated norms and practices linked to marriage, mobility and inheritance that make up gender relations in different parts of India. If we accept that investments in the survival and well-being of a family member tell us something important about the value attached to that member, the analysis by Drèze and Sen (1995) tells us that the structural variables making up gender relations in different parts of India are far more important in determining the extent to which the girl child is valued within the family than the individual characteristics of their parents.

Jejeebhoy's (1997) study—which compared Tamil Nadu, one of India's southern states, with Uttar Pradesh, a northern state—offers some more basic insights into this relationship between structure and individual. Her study explored the effects of a range of variables on women's autonomy, some of which reflected factors traditionally associated with female status (such as number of children and, more specifically, number of sons; co-residence with mother-in-law; size of dowry), as well as education and waged employment, variables associated with the modernization paradigm. Measures of women's autonomy included their role in decision making, mobility, incidence of domestic violence, access to economic resources and control over economic resources. Predictably, women in Tamil Nadu fared better on most indicators of autonomy than women in Uttar Pradesh.

However, she also found that what helped to explain women's autonomy varied by region. In general, the traditional factors conferring status on women—the number of sons they bore, the size of their dowry and nuclear family residence—were more closely

linked with the female autonomy indicators in the restrictive context of Uttar Pradesh than they were in the more egalitarian context of Tamil Nadu.

In Uttar Pradesh, women who had brought large dowries to their marriages, who lived in nuclear families and who produced sons were far more likely to report a greater role in household decision making, and greater freedom from domestic violence,<sup>17</sup> than were other women. While female employment also had significant and positive implications for most of the autonomy indicators in Uttar Pradesh, education had a far weaker and less significant impact. In Tamil Nadu, however, the effects of these more traditional "status"-related variables were far weaker; and female employment and, even more strongly, female education were both far more consistently related to women's autonomy.

There are a number of points to draw out of Jejeebhoy's (1997) study. First of all, it points to women's rationale, in certain contexts, for making choices that are essentially disempowering. The contextual variables in her study, as in Drèze and Sen's (1995), are a shorthand for the deeply entrenched rules, norms and practices that shape social relations in different parts of India and help to influence behaviour, define values and *shape choice*. Since women are likely to gain greater respect within their communities when they conform to its norms, and to be penalized if they do not, their own values and behaviour are likely to reflect those of the wider community and to reproduce its injustices. There is evidence, for instance, that women in northern states (such as Uttar Pradesh) are far more likely to express strong son preference than those in southern states such as Tamil Nadu (Dyson and Moore 1983). The apparently "voluntary" nature of such choices should not detract our attention from their consequences. If empowerment is simply equated with a decision-making role and "control" over household resources, then having sons and bringing in a large dowry would be considered conducive to women's empowerment. Yet dowry simultaneously expresses and reinforces son preference, and transforms daughters into financial liabilities for their parents. Both dowry and son preference are central to the values and practices through which women are socially defined as a subordinate category in a state with some of the starkest indicators of gender discrimination on the Indian subcontinent.

Second, Jejeebhoy's finding that women's waged employment had a more marked effect in Uttar Pradesh than did their education on their role in household decision making and access to intrahousehold resources, but that both were important in Tamil Nadu, takes us back to the importance of knowing what "access" means in relation to different resources and in different contexts. While both education and waged work are considered to promote women's agency in various ways, they are differently acquired and represent different kinds of resources. Women's education is the product of the parental decision to invest in daughters, but their participation in the labour market is a more direct reflection of their own agency.<sup>18</sup> In addition, both forms of access are likely to have very different implications in different contexts.

Where women's public mobility, and hence participation in waged employment, is severely curtailed by social norms, as in the Uttar Pradesh, their presence in the labour

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<sup>17</sup> The link between number of sons borne and lower incidence of violence echoes the findings reported for Bangladesh by Schuler et al. 1996.

<sup>18</sup> Bearing in mind the earlier discussion about the possible connection between women's exercise of agency and male violence, it is interesting to note that waged employment was more likely to be associated with male violence in both contexts, but significantly so in Tamil Nadu.

market is likely to be a response to poverty but clearly also signals a certain degree of assertiveness on their part. Furthermore, it increases the chances that, having access to an income of their own, they are more likely to exercise some agency in household decision making and to have resources of their own. Education, on the other hand, tends to be a positional or status good, signalling prosperity rather than poverty, and is more likely to characterize women from better-off households. Within the restrictive gender relations of this part of northern India, this is precisely the social stratum of households that is likely to be most restrictive in relation to women. In such contexts, education may increase women's effectiveness in the traditional roles assigned to them. But it is unlikely to override, and may indeed reinforce, restrictive interpretations of these roles. Das Gupta (1987), for instance, found that female education in rural Punjab was associated with greater discrimination against daughters and higher sex differentials in children's survival chances. In Tamil Nadu, on the other hand, where social norms are more conducive to women's agency, regardless of class, education is far more likely to enhance women's autonomy as agents.

A study in Tamil Nadu by Dharmalingam and Morgan (1996) sheds further light on the relationship between wider context and individual agency. They focused on two villages in Tamil Nadu, very close to each other and similar in most respects (caste relations, religious mix, ecology and historical backgrounds) but with contrasting female employment opportunities and educational indicators. In one village, a very high percentage of women and girls were involved in paid work, while in the other women were largely involved in housework while girls were at school. They sought to explore the effects of village setting and women's education and employment levels on three measures of women's autonomy: women's reported ability to support themselves and their dependants with husbands' assistance; freedom of movement within and between villages; and "spousal interaction" or communication between spouses on matters to do with family finance and desired family size.

They found that village setting was more clearly and consistently related to measures of autonomy than were the individual characteristics of women. Women in the village with higher labour force participation scored higher for each of the measures, regardless of their labour force participation, education levels and a variety of other household and demographic characteristics. Women's work status and education levels were also associated with the indicators of autonomy, but not consistently: women who worked were more likely to report economic self-reliance, while educated women reported lower levels of mobility. The authors explain these village-level differences in terms of the introduction of *beedi* work in the early 1970s in the village with higher female economic activity. This not only gave women an independent earning opportunity but also required them to increase their mobility outside the home. The main point to draw out of this study, which reinforces the earlier discussion about the influence of context in shaping behaviour, relates to the fact that the changes associated with *beedi* work led to major changes in social parameters for the entire village, not only for those women directly involved in *beedi* work.

Given the mass scale of *beedi* work all households are affected. Former norms regarding mobility, for instance, cannot be maintained in the face of these new circumstances. Village-level social control rests on notions of what is 'natural and proper' for women to do. When the majority change their behaviour, what is natural and proper can be renegotiated within both the household and the community. (Dharmalingam and Morgan 1996:198)

Two related studies from rural Nepal offer further interesting insights into the question of contextual versus individual variables in shaping women's agency and autonomy (Morgan and Niraula 1995; Niraula and Morgan 1996). They examined influence of contextual variables and individual characteristics on a number of measures of women's autonomy as well as the relative significance of context and individual autonomy on certain functioning achievements. "Context" was captured by contrasting two villages in Nepal. One village was located in a *tarai* (plains) setting and shared many of the social characteristics of Hindu culture in northern India, including its rigid caste and gender relationships. The other was located in the hills and was characterized by a less orthodox Hinduism, which incorporated aspects of tribal and Buddhist beliefs and practices and had a more relaxed caste and gender regime. Differences in social practices in the two villages were captured by a number of marriage-related behavioural variables: likelihood of "choice", rather than "arrangement", in women's selection of their marriage partner; ability to leave an unsatisfactory marriage and enter a new one; continued contact with one's natal family after marriage; willingness to let children choose their own spouses. Autonomy was measured by women's role in household decision making and freedom of movement in the public domain. Finally, functioning achievements were captured by family size preferences, son preference and use of contraception.

Focusing first on individual marital behaviour and attitudes, they found, not unexpectedly, that women who exercised greater choice in their marriage-related behaviour also enjoyed greater freedom of movement and exercised a greater role in household decision making. However, adding the effects of "context", that is, bringing in a dummy variable to control for village location, led to a marked reduction in the association between these individual aspects of behaviour and the indicators of women's agency. In other words, without the village dummy variable, there was a strong association between women who had exercised choice in relation to their marriage partner and the mobility index, but the association disappeared once context was factored in.

The effect of context in defining the parameters of women's autonomy meant that context also mediated the effects of women's autonomy on a number of functioning achievements. Explored separately, "context" and individual autonomy had the expected effects. Women in the more restrictive village were more likely to express preference for sons, to want larger numbers of children and to have educated children, particularly educated daughters. They were also less likely to use contraception. The relationship between individual autonomy and reproductive choice was also predictable: women with greater freedom of movement were more likely to use contraception when they did not want any more children. When the effects of both individual agency and village setting were explored together, both effects remained significant but in a reduced form. The authors concluded that, while individual agency did increase women's ability to implement reproductive choice, such agency itself was largely shaped by social context rather than by the characteristics of the individual.

The discussion about the importance of context in shaping individual behaviour suggests that many dimensions of (dis)empowerment treated as having a relationship of cause and effect in the literature may, in fact, be products of the same underlying social context. As Niraula and Morgan point out, context operates in the lives of individuals as the sum total of institutional arrangements—one cannot pull apart the different elements of the institutional context and measure the separate effect of each: "The context specifies appropriate goals and the means for achieving them. Such a role for context does not deny *individual agency* but stresses how context constrains rationality for all local actors"

(1996:46). Consequently, the discussion helps to explain in greater detail why empowerment cannot be conceptualized simply in terms of choice, but must incorporate an assessment of the values embedded in agency and choice—values, which reflect the wider context. It points, in other words, to the need make a distinction between “status” and “autonomy” as criteria in evaluating agency and choice from an empowerment perspective.

Status, in the sense used here, has been defined in terms of social standing within a community derived from meeting the expectations set up by a hierarchy outside oneself: status implies hierarchy.<sup>19</sup> Status considerations are relevant to hierarchies of class and caste as well as gender, so that norms defining gender propriety are frequently bound up with the maintenance of hierarchies of caste and class. Autonomy, on the other hand, refers to qualities of self-determination and independence; it refers to the capacity to define one’s own goals and act on them without reference to notions of propriety and social standing. Autonomy is thus rooted in the notion of the individual, while status is derived at a social level.

However, individuals rarely operate as if they do not exist in society. All forms of autonomy are also socially embedded. The value of the idea of “status” is that it draws attention to the influence of “the social” in ascribing greater value to certain kinds of choices over others, and hence gives greater value to those who make these choices. In other words, it reminds us of the interconnectedness of social life in that we care what others think. However, in certain contexts, the nature of prevailing status considerations and cultural values will lead women to choose dependence over autonomy, not only by curtailing their ability to act autonomously, but by bestowing prestige, honour and value to those who conform to these norms. When such contexts set up a trade-off for women between their ability to make independent choices in critical arenas of their lives—such as marriage, reproduction, friendship and so on—and their ability to enjoy status and respect within the family and community, status becomes antithetical to autonomy. As G. Sen comments in relation to reproductive choice:

The point is especially apparent in gender hierarchies where, for example, a woman’s status may be linked to her fertility. Bearing the approved number of children will grant a woman the rights and privileges accorded to a fertile woman, but do not necessarily give her greater autonomy in decision-making (1993:198).

More strongly, in such contexts, status is also likely to be antithetical to empowerment. The need to bear the approved number of children in order to secure social status and family approval takes its toll on women’s bodies and on their lives as they bear children beyond their capacity. Furthermore, status considerations in cultures of son preference require women to give birth to a certain number of sons; to favour their sons over their daughters in ways that reinforce social discrimination against women; and to bring their daughters up to devalue themselves, thereby acting as agents in the transmission of gender discrimination over generations. Status considerations also lead to the more hidden costs of dependency, difficult to measure but testified to eloquently by women all over the world.<sup>20</sup> Finally, in the extreme, status considerations can lead to cultures where female infanticide and foeticide, female circumcision and widow immolation all become “rational” responses to social norms.

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<sup>19</sup> See the discussion in Abadian 1996.

<sup>20</sup> Kabear 1997a; Rowlands 1997; Villareal 1990; Silberschmidt 1992.

### ***Outsider values and women's empowerment: Prescribing altruism***

The discussion in the preceding sections elaborates on the rationale for the highly qualified notion of choice that informs the understanding of empowerment in this chapter, pointing to the significance of social context in shaping the values justifying the subordinate status of women and to the internalization of these values by women themselves. However, the qualifications to the notion of choice put forward in the analysis bring in an external normative standpoint, a set of values other than women's own, as the criteria for assessing the meaning of their choices. The problem that this raises is not one of a normative standpoint per se—the whole idea of development is, after all, based on some kind of normative standpoint—but in determining the extent to which this normative standpoint expresses values that are relevant to the reality it seeks to evaluate. There is always the danger that when we assess “choice” from a standpoint other than that of the person making the choice, we will be led back to ourselves and to our own norms and values.

The tendency to re-present “the self” in representing “the other” has been noted by Mohanty, who describes the way Third World women from a variety of contexts tend to get reduced and universalized, particularly in texts coming out of the field of women and development: “This average Third World woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being Third World (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.)” (1991:56). Although this portrayal of the “average” disempowered Third World woman was intended to evoke sympathy and action on their behalf, its reductionism reflected the fact that the social distances of location, class, nationality and language that often separate researcher and “researched” in the social sciences tend to be particularly large in the development field.

The same distances help to explain why attempts to define and measure women's empowerment have given rise to similarly averaging tendencies in the portrayal of the *empowered* woman. I want to point to two distinct examples of these “averaging” tendencies, coming out of quite different forms of scholarship and advocacy, addressing different dimensions of “cooperative conflict” within the household and both containing some elements of truth but large elements of simplification. The first is associated with instrumentalist advocacy of the kind we noted at the start of this chapter and tends to favour the “cooperative” dimension, advancing a “virtuous” model of the empowered woman. Ackerly, for instance, makes this point in relation to the model of the empowered woman that implicitly informs many of the credit programmes for women in Bangladesh: “Empowered’, the borrower wisely invests money in a successful enterprise, her husband stops beating her, she sends her children to school, she improves the health and nutrition of her family, and she participates in major family decisions” (Ackerly 1995:56).

Neoclassical economics also contributed to the construction of the altruistic Third World woman as it shifted from its earlier emphasis on the male household head as “benevolent dictator”, who it now transpires spends most of his money on alcohol, other women and other reprehensible “adult goods”, to the altruistic mother who spends hers on her children and family (Hart 1997). The virtuous model of empowerment endows women with a number of different traits that form the basis of advocacy claims on their behalf: altruism, of course, and the dedication to the collective family welfare; thrift and risk-aversion; industriousness in the form of long hours of work and in little need for leisure; a sense of civic responsibility, manifested in willingness to take on unpaid community work; and a natural affinity for collective action to achieve the common good

(social forestry programmes, loan repayment, community health care, etc.) but an aversion to collective action at the workplace to promote class interest.

The instrumentalist model of the empowered Third World woman has given rise to a range of interventions that seek to reap the policy benefits of women's virtues based on the now familiar "win-win" format, which asserts that gender equality/women's empowerment is both an important end in itself and also essential to the achievement of efficiency/fertility decline/environmental sustainability/family welfare/poverty alleviation/good governance. The fact that these interventions are largely made on instrumentalist grounds does not mean that women do not obtain any benefits from them. Instrumentalism is, after all, a game that two can play, and studies suggest that not only have women benefited from such interventions, which have ensured them access to a range of development benefits that had previously been withheld from them (credit, education, literacy, family planning, new collective relationships and employment), but they have also drawn on this policy discourse in instrumental ways to promote their own interests.<sup>21</sup>

However, instrumentalist advocacy has also had its costs. At the conceptual level, women's empowerment as a central element of social justice and as a valued goal in itself has had to take second place to the demonstration of its synergy with official development goals. It has been adopted as an issue by scholars, governments and international agencies whose interest in empowering women is limited to whether this will "deliver the goods". Instead of an open-ended process of social transformation, this discourse produces a notion of empowerment as electric shock therapy to be applied at intervals to ensure the right responses: "empowerment appears to be best 'learned' early and needs reinforcement through constant exposure to empowering circumstances" (Kishor 1997:16). Delivering resources for women's empowerment on instrumentalist grounds may fail to realize their full transformatory potential because empowerment per se was never really on the agenda.

Alternatively, it may empower women but fail to realize the presumed policy impact because the "win-win" formula does not apply. Women do not always share the same priorities as policy makers and development agencies and they may define their own empowerment in forms not intended by those designing interventions. As Whitehead (1981), Sen (1990) and others have pointed out, there are sound reasons why women's interests are likely to be better served by investing effort and resources in the collective welfare of the household rather than in their own personal welfare. However, it is important to recognize that such altruism is often a manifestation of their disempowerment, a response to their restricted options rather than a "natural" female attribute. If efforts to channel resources to women succeed in empowering them, they will also succeed in bringing a number of options that had previously been denied to them into the realm of possibility. Not all women will choose options likely to receive the official stamp of approval.

As we saw, in some cases, women's greater "voice" within the household can lead to greater conflict therein, particularly within marriage, as well as to possible intensification of male violence. In other cases, women may choose the "exit" option, and there is evidence from a variety of contexts to suggest that women will choose this option when it becomes possible. In the US context, England and Farkas (1986) suggest that the rising access to employment by women since the 1950s and the rise of single motherhood, as a

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<sup>21</sup> Jackson 1996; Harrison 1997; Villareal 1990.



result of divorce or of births outside marriage, is not coincidental: "the short version of the story is probably that employment gave women the freedom to leave unhappy marriages" (England 1997). Literature from sub-Saharan Africa points to women setting up on their own once they have independent economic resources (Roberts 1989). Hoogenboezem found that several of the women who had participated in a legal literacy programme run by the Women's Action Group in Zimbabwe stated that once they knew about the procedures to be followed, they sued their husbands for divorce (1997:85). Moore (1994)<sup>22</sup> cites evidence from Thailand that access to an independent income has given many women the ability to walk out of unsatisfactory marriages. Chant (1997) also concluded on the basis of her empirical data from Costa Rica, Mexico and the Philippines that women often opted to set up their own households, despite the moral stigma and poverty frequently associated with this decision, rather than live with unsatisfactory husbands/partners.

My own research in Bangladesh confirms this connection. The emergence of new waged opportunities for women in urban areas has made it possible for many women to leave husbands who had humiliated, beaten or deceived them (Kabeer 1997a). In rural areas, where social disapproval makes life very difficult for women on their own, women who wanted to leave their husbands had a number of options if they could not return to the parental home (Kabeer 1998). Some migrated into the towns, where community pressure was less intense, and took up waged employment. Others used their access to new resources, such as credit, to effect a "divorce within marriage", setting up a parallel economy within the household that allowed them to be economically self-reliant. Finally, the possibility of economic independence has allowed women in a number of different parts of the world to delay or opt against entering marriage: data from Japan, Java and Bangladesh point in this direction.<sup>23</sup>

### ***Outsider models of women's empowerment: Prescribing autonomy***

If female virtues of various kinds, and their associated benefits, underpin instrumentalist approaches to women's empowerment within official development agencies, then feminist scholarship and advocacy outside these agencies, and often intended to challenge their assumptions, focus far more on the conflictual element of gender relations and hence tend toward a prescriptive model of empowerment based on women's autonomy. The danger of prescriptiveness is always implicit in any discussion about women's empowerment, since the very notion of women's empowerment is premised on a model of how gender relations "ought" to be rather than on "how they are". However, the danger is more real in the context of development studies because, as noted earlier, the distances separating the researcher from the "researched" are so often distances of culture. The likelihood of adopting a normative standpoint that is not sufficiently informed about the prospects and constraints making up women's perceived set of possibilities in different contexts is consequently that much greater.

A great deal of the prescriptiveness evident in these analyses reflects an unacknowledged tension between "separation" and "connectedness" in definitions of autonomy. While instrumentalist notions of empowerment appear to give value to the notion of altruism and "connectedness", some forms of feminist analysis accord greater

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<sup>22</sup> Editor's note: Moore 1994 is included as chapter 1 in the present volume.

<sup>23</sup> Tsuya 1997; Wolf 1992; Amin et al.1998.

recognition to individualized forms of empowerment. The origins of this are understandable: it reflects recognition of the widespread tendency of women to subordinate their own needs to those of others within the family.<sup>24</sup> Fierlbeck, for instance, argues that women would be much more likely to expand their ability to make choices if they were to view themselves as individuals rather than as members of a social group (1995:29). Jackson, noting the widespread evidence that women subordinate their own interests to those of the family, comments: "It may well be true that women prioritize children's needs, but there is a sense in which one might wish women to be a little less selfless and self-sacrificing" (1996:497).

Studies from some parts of the world suggest that many women seek separate living arrangements, or even set up their own households, when they are economically able to do so. In such contexts it may make sense to ask, as does Lloyd: "If income permits, wouldn't a mother-child unit prefer to form a separate household with its own decision-making autonomy rather than join a more complex household under other (most likely male or older female) authority?" (1995:17). However, in contexts where households are organized along more corporate lines, where a powerful ideology of "togetherness" binds the activities and resources of family together under the control of the male head, such a question would have very little resonance. Even in a situation of rising female employment and wages, women do not *actively* seek the opportunity to set up separate units from men or older females because such autonomous units are neither socially acceptable nor individually desired. Instead, they invest considerable time and effort in maintaining their marriages, in strengthening the "cooperative" dimension of cooperative conflict, seeking separation only in exceptional circumstances and, as Chant (1997) points out, often only when their sons are old enough to step into the role of male provider.

Indicators of women's empowerment, therefore, have to be sensitive to the way context will shape processes of empowerment. Access to new resources may open up new possibilities for women, but they are unlikely to seek to realize these possibilities in uniform ways across contexts or even within the same context. Instead, they will be influenced by the intersection of social relations and individual histories from which they view these new possibilities. Unless indicators are sensitive to these contextual possibilities, they are likely to underestimate the significance of those transformations that *do* occur.

Returning, for instance, to some of the evaluations of credit programmes in Bangladesh, we find that for Goetz and Sen Gupta (1996), empowerment is conceptualized in zero-sum terms: there is no place in their measure for "joint control" over loans, only for "more" or "less" control by women. Similarly, an evaluation by Montgomery et al. (1996) recognizes only evidence of individual decision making by women loanees as indicative of the transformatory potential of women's access to credit, equating "joint decision making" with disguised male dominance. Yet, in situations where women have been marginalized in household decision making, social transformation is less likely to take the form of the emergence of individualized decision making and more likely to take the form of greater equality in decision making. Not surprisingly, evaluations that allow for increases in both "joint" and "individual" forms of

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<sup>24</sup> See contributions in Dwyer and Bruce 1988.

decision making by women as evidence of change tend to offer more optimistic assessments of the impact of credit.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, the fact that women are able to move more freely in the public domain in those parts of the Indian subcontinent where they are also believed to enjoy greater autonomy does not automatically mean that the ability to move freely in the public domain will carry the same meaning in those regions where norms of female seclusion apply. As I have pointed out, the public domain does not just carry very different social meanings in different contexts, but different locations in the public domain can carry different meanings in the same context. While enabling women's direct access to the market in situations may indeed be the most effective way to enhance their control over resources, recommendations that women be provided with transportation to take them to the market place and security measures to protect them from physical assault by hostile men (Goetz and Sen Gupta 1996) miss the point. By and large, the reason that many women in rural Bangladesh do not go to the market place is not because of what men *do* but because of what people *say*. The constraint in question is one of local values rather than brute male force. As long as *purdah* norms remain a powerful social ideal governing women's behaviour in rural Bangladesh, their presence in the public domain, and in particular locations in the public domain, such as the market, is likely to signal poverty and lack of choice rather than empowerment and the exercise of choice.

The "social embeddedness" of choice may explain why a number of studies have found that women's access to resources is far more likely to translate into changes in intrahousehold relations (such as decision making, reduction of male violence, greater equity in welfare distribution) and much slower to translate into public forms of change. In her analysis of women's access to factory employment in Java, Wolf noted that such access had increased women's "room for manoeuvre" within the home, expanding their ability to make critical life choices in relation to timing of marriage, choice of partner and resistance to patriarchal controls within the home. However, it had not empowered them sufficiently to challenge patriarchal controls of the workplace, which kept them "relatively acquiescent, poorly paid and vastly unprotected in industrial jobs that are often dangerous" (1992:255). In Niraula and Morgan's 1996 study of rural Nepal, many more women reported "voice" in decision making, the outcome of interpersonal negotiations and individual assertiveness, than freedom of movement in the public domain, an achievement far more subject to the norms and sanctions of the wider community. My own research in Bangladesh supported this interpretation, but with the additional point that women who moved freely in the public domain, particularly the market domain, were not only subject to community censure but also seen to signal their husband's incapacity to fulfil his role as breadwinner and guardian. Public renegotiations of gender norms are likely to carry higher costs than private ones, not only because they entail taking on the norms of a powerful community—and perhaps losing community support—but also because they may expose family members to public ridicule.

The discussion here is not intended as a return to a cultural relativism, but as an indication of the need for a culturally informed one. The notion of choice that figures in our notion of empowerment asks about whether it would have been possible to choose otherwise, and the consequences of choices, but it does not seek to prescribe choices. Greater sensitivity to the likelihood that empowerment is socially embedded—to the

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<sup>25</sup> Rahman 1986; Hashemi et al. 1996; Kabeer 1998.

aspects of their culture that women might value and seek to reproduce in processes of change and those they reject or seek to modify—is far more likely to be found in studies reflecting an experiential understanding of local contexts than in the brief encounters that often characterize development studies. A number of more culturally nuanced studies have raised the need to rethink many of the key concepts featuring in the literature on women’s empowerment, particularly such notions of “autonomy” and “control”. Talking about South Asia, where gender discrimination takes some of its most extreme forms, Basu makes the following important point:

[T]he force of custom and norm cannot be too strongly stressed. The standard defence that much that is unfortunate about women’s status reflects a conscious preference by women in this society is, at least superficially, valid. The internalization of norms over generations means that subjective perceptions about inequality and subordination need have no connection with an outsider’s views on these matters. And nor is it clear that one view is more real than the other. It is only in certain clearly defined and agreed upon goals such as an equal right to life, for example, that there can be any universal ethic. For the rest, the kind of modernization and westernization which lead to a questioning of existing norms about female subordination and the valuation of autonomy over, say, economic security need not have any kind of universal appeal. (1996)

A similar point about the need to recognize the social embeddedness of change came out of Villarreal’s (1990) study of a development intervention in western Mexico and led her and others (Arce et al. 1994) to question Schriver’s definition of autonomy as “control over their lives, their bodies and their projects”, and also to ask what such a notion of “control” meant in the context of rural Mexico:

Autonomy can be a misleading concept. Looking at the boundaries they placed on their projects, at the meanings they accorded their beekeeping, agricultural and household activities, and at the kinds of roles they were willing to see themselves playing, we have found the women of Ayuquila renewing their bonds with their menfolk, not breaking them unless it is really necessary, while at the same time working to build up their other networks and creating new ones. This is not without problems, since one can easily see the constraints faced by these women...Nevertheless the case illustrates the importance of understanding the efforts of poor, rural women in the creation, appropriation and conservation of space for themselves...It implies power, negotiation and consent (1994:168–169).

For White (1992), the importance of interdependence between family members in rural Bangladesh throws doubt on the notion of “autonomy” as an indicator of degrees of power and she cites instead the notion of “centrality” put forward by McCarthy (1967), which focuses on relationships as a more appropriate concept rather than prioritizing individualism. My own research suggests that in situations where gender relationships within the family and community are based on relations of unequal *interdependence*, the search for empowerment may take the form of a search for greater *equality* rather than greater *independence*, for the democratization of family relationships rather than their disruption. Chen’s (1983) work on renegotiations of gender relations in Bangladesh supports Basu’s point that, at least in the South Asian context, women may opt for more indirect forms of empowerment that retain the public image, and honour, of the traditional decision maker, but that nevertheless increase their “backstage” influence in decision-making processes. Such strategies may reflect prudence and caution on the part of women, as Nussbaum (1995) points out, but these are strategic virtues in situations where they have as much to lose from the disruption of social relationships in the processes of empowerment than they have to gain.

## Conclusion

The concept of empowerment is extremely difficult to measure due to the elusiveness of its meaning and the values with which it tends to be loaded. While the notion of choice has been made central to the understanding of empowerment that informs this chapter, it has had to be qualified in a number of ways to allow for these problems of meaning and values. As a result, our concern has been less with the subjective preferences of individuals and more with the conditions and consequences of the choices they make.

The other problem is that empowerment is essentially about *change*. Many of the indicators discussed here provide “snapshot” accounts, often using cross-sectional variations to capture change. There is an implicit assumption underlying many of these measurements that we can somehow predict the processes of change involved in empowerment, whereas human agency is indeterminate and hence unpredictable. Any change in the structure of opportunities and constraints in which individuals make choices can bring into existence a variety of different responses, which can have quite different impacts and meanings in different contexts.

The task of measurement is further complicated when the focus is on intrahousehold relationships. Although the household constitutes an important arena for establishing greater equality between women and men, more than most other arenas, negotiations between women and men are complicated by the entanglements of issues of power, intimacy and identity that make up the essence of cooperative conflict within the family. Attempts at measurement in this arena are most likely to be fraught with problems of misrecognition and misinterpretation.

This suggests that there is no single linear model of change by which a cause can be identified for women's disempowerment and altered to create the desired effect. Giving women access to credit, creating constitutional provision for political participation and equalizing educational opportunities are unlikely to be automatically empowering in themselves, but they create the vantage point of alternatives that allows a more transformatory consciousness to come into play. However, the translation of resources and opportunities into the kinds of functioning achievements that would signal empowerment is likely to be closely influenced by the possibilities for transformation on the ground, and how they are perceived and assessed. To attempt to predict at the outset of an intervention precisely how it will change women's lives—without some knowledge of ways of “being and doing” that are realizable and valued by women in that context—runs into the danger of prescribing a particular process of empowerment and thereby violating its essence, which is to enhance women's capacity for self-determination.

Bearing these various caveats in mind, we can draw out certain policy and methodological implications from the discussion in this chapter for the practical project of women's empowerment. Many of the resources, agency and achievements featuring in the empowerment literature are integral to the broader developmental agenda. The arguments for equalizing access to health, education, credit, land, livelihoods and employment opportunities—as well as equality in the wider political domain, which has not been dealt with in this chapter—rest solidly on grounds of gender equity and social justice, regardless of their implications for intrahousehold relationships and female autonomy. In particular, we need to draw attention once again to the consistency with which measures of women's economic activity appear to be related to various measures of their agency and achievements, both on their own behalf and on behalf of their families, in a wide variety of contexts. Indeed, women's economic activity performs far more consistently than education in predicting outcomes that are positive by both welfare and

empowerment criteria. We may want a more qualified understanding of economic activity for women to take account of the terms, working conditions and so on, but if we take seriously the findings of the various studies reviewed here, it is clear that some version of economic activity is vital to women's self-esteem and empowerment.

Whatever the specific priorities in different contexts, this chapter suggests that both official development agencies and social movements have important contributions to make to the project of women's empowerment, based on their comparative advantages. Creating equality of access to these various valued resources for sections of society that are otherwise excluded from them is clearly a vital and legitimate area for public policy interventions. As we saw, the expenditure of public resources generally generates a demand for objectively verifiable indicators that can help to provide evidence of the cost effectiveness of different policy measures. However, changes in access to valued goods are far simpler to measure, regardless of context, than the subtle and open-ended negotiations that may go on within culturally differentiated families in connection with improvements in access. They are also indicative of changes in the conditions of choice. Greater investments in women's health and well-being in contexts where they previously suffered deprivation, greater access to paid activities in contexts where they were previously denied such opportunities, greater evidence that they participate in the political processes of their communities in situations where they were previously disenfranchised are all critical aspects of the context of choice.

At the same time, creating "access" is not enough. Equity requires that poorer women and other excluded groups are not just able to take advantage of such access, but that they do so on terms that respect and promote their ability to exercise choice. Such achievements are less easy to quantify since they deal more directly with questions of power and negotiation and have to be far more sensitive to local cultural nuances. They have to be monitored through methodologically pluralist approaches combining quantitative and qualitative data, preferably by grassroots-based organizations whose greater embeddedness in local realities enables them to combine "emic understanding with etic analysis" (Harriss 1996).

Such achievements also require imaginative strategies. I pointed earlier to evidence suggesting that educated women appeared better able, in a number of different contexts, to negotiate with public providers of various social goods to ensure that their needs were addressed. Such evidence suggests an important role for female education in the achievement of welfare and empowerment goals. However, limiting the policy implication of such findings to the improved provision of female education on the grounds that it improves women's access to other valued resources is based on a very narrow reading of these findings. It still places the onus of change largely on women themselves. The mainstream institutions through which goods and services, employment and livelihoods are generated escape policy attention and their norms and practices are left largely intact. Furthermore, it overlooks the fact that education is often a proxy for social class in the contexts of these studies, so that the greater responsiveness of public officials to educated women is partly a response to their class status.

We can therefore think of a second, and perhaps more challenging, policy implication of these studies, which is the need to shape the distribution of social goods in a way that is responsive to the needs and interests of *all* sections of the population, regardless of gender, class and level of education. Grassroots organizations have a vital role to play in building bottom-up pressures for greater accountability, efficiency and

respect in public service delivery.<sup>26</sup> However, for such bottom-up pressure to occur, other conditions have to be brought into existence. Certain forms of gender inequality have now been given recognition in the public arena, thanks largely to the collective efforts of these organizations, and attempts are being made to redress these inequalities through more sensitive policy practice. Other forms of inequality, however, remain buried at the level of *doxa* within the communities and groups that practise them, and advocacy to address them has failed to garner active support in the public domain.

Such inequalities cannot be addressed by individuals alone. Although we have cited evidence that individual women can, and do, act against the norm, their impact on the situation of women in general is likely to remain limited and they may have to pay a high price for their autonomy. The project of women's empowerment depends on collective solidarity in the public arena as well as individual assertiveness in the private. Women's organizations and social movements in general have an important role to play in this project. They are able to raise questions about forms of injustice that are taken for granted to such an extent as to appear natural, and to challenge forms of hierarchy that appear to be too deeply entrenched to destabilize. They are also likely to be much closer to realities on the ground than official agencies of development. They are hence more able to tailor their strategies to local realities, to avoid prescribing specific definitions of "autonomy" over others, and to concentrate instead on creating the possibilities that will allow women "the exercise of informed choice within an expanding framework of information, knowledge and analysis...a process which must enable women to discover new possibilities, new options...a growing repertoire of choices" (Baltiwala 1994). They can then leave it to individual women, and men, in the diversity of circumstances in which they live, to work out what forms of social change they wish to see and how they want to make it happen.

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<sup>26</sup> See Fraser 1997 for a powerfully argued case for the importance of recognition as well as redistribution in the struggle for social justice.

## GENDERED DIMENSIONS OF DEVELOPMENT

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## Chapter 16

# The Quest for Gender Equality<sup>1</sup>

*Gita Sen*<sup>2</sup>

(2006)

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### Introduction

The field of gender and development is often viewed as a sterling example of researchers and activists working together to bring about policy change. A cursory glance at the kinds of policy changes that have occurred in the latter part of the twentieth century suggests strong confirmation for this view. Across a sweeping range of issues, from macroeconomics to human rights and political participation, feminist researchers and activists from women's movements<sup>3</sup> appear to have succeeded in bringing about significant changes both in discourse and in actual policy.

Furthermore, this happened in a relatively short 30-year timespan during which the field of gender and development was itself evolving and taking definition. Perhaps this openness and fluidity in the analytical underpinnings of the field brought a salutary humility to the ways in which researchers were willing to listen to and learn from ground-level activists! Be that as it may, during this time policy was made, changed and shaped by the agglomeration of researchers and activists that call themselves part of the women's movement. And policy makers who rarely have time or patience to deal with the intellectual vagaries of a newly evolving field appear to have paid attention.

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<sup>2</sup> Gita Sen is Sir Ratan Tata Chair Professor at the Indian Institute of Management in Bangalore, and Adjunct Professor of Population and International Health at the Faculty of Public Health, Harvard University. She is a founding member of DAWN and a trustee of HealthWatch (India).

<sup>3</sup> In this chapter there is no detailed definition or discussion of the nature or structure of international or national women's movements. The term is used here in a fairly general sense, adequate to this discussion. For a more elaborate discussion of the structure, issues and challenges of the international women's movement, see Antrobus 2004, and Antrobus and Sen 2006.

What lessons are there to be learned by those who attempt to create knowledge to support social policy? Is the experience of the women's movement unique or special? Was it the result of the serendipitous presence of the right people in the right places at the right times? Were there critical elements of conscious planning? And, central to the concerns of this chapter, is social activism the key to effective translation of research-based knowledge into policy? On the other hand, can activism by itself effect policy change? When and to what extent is research necessary? Are different combinations of research and activism required in different circumstances? The experience of gender and development provides a rich basis for addressing some of these questions. Looking more closely at this experience offers insights into how the relationship between research and policy is mediated by politics, discourse, subjectivity and learning.

The discussion of the chapter draws from three illustrative examples of policy change: engendering macroeconomics; sexual and reproductive health and rights; and human rights, especially violence against women. In discussing these, we show that the relationship of activism to research has been far from smooth, and continues to be fraught with challenges. Nonetheless, it offers a number of lessons for how a better understanding of the politics of policy and the politics of discourse may actually help to close the gaps between research and policy.

## Illustrations of Policy Change

The three illustrations below raise a number of common issues that are addressed in later sections.

### ***Engendering<sup>4</sup> macroeconomics***

The field of gender and development took shape in the 1970s following the pioneering work of Ester Boserup (1970). Its evolution was informed by the critical research of feminist anthropologists and historians, many of whom drew from and counterposed their work to that of socialist historians and analysts. Particularly influential were the two volumes of anthropological writing edited by Rosaldo and Lamphere (1974) and Reiter (1975), the latter including Rubin's (1975) important essay on "the traffic in women"; the work of historians such as Tilly and Scott (1987) who brought a gender lens to earlier gender-blind depictions of the industrial revolution; the analytical integration of production and reproduction in the research of the British "subordination of women" group (Edholm et al. 1977); and the critique of Boserup's argument that the problem for women was lack of "integration" into development (Beneria and Sen 1981). This research was analytically rigorous, grounded in history and ethnography, and critical. It helped the field overall to assimilate these characteristics from its early beginnings.

These analytical underpinnings also helped feminists to interpret the difficulties faced by early policy attempts to integrate women in development (Tinker 1976; Buvinić 1984), as well as to develop new ways of understanding the experience of organizations working with women on the ground. The 1970s were not a period of major oppositional activism on gender and development. It was rather a period of developing analytical tools,

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<sup>4</sup> The term "engendering" is used here both with its traditional dictionary meaning and also to mean "incorporating gender into".

gathering experience and sharpening understanding.<sup>5</sup> There was not, at this time, a sharp distinction between researchers and activists; this blurring of roles may also have been due to the importance of universities in the social uprisings of the 1960s. Researchers wore the badge of activism with honour, and activists turned overnight into respected analysts and researchers.

The period of the 1970s saw the beginnings of the feminist critique of growth processes that are inimical to equity and sustainability, even as they ignore the requirements of human survival and reproduction where women hold central responsibility. Feminists were not as yet thinking or writing in terms of macroeconomics, but their work was focused on understanding the place of gender in socioeconomic systems. As such it sharpened feminist ability to use system-focused approaches that are central to macroeconomics.

This preparation came to quick fruition in the conservative policy climate of the 1980s—the Reagan-Thatcher revolution in the North and the Washington Consensus-based structural adjustment programmes promoted by the Bretton Woods institutions (BWIs) in the South. Feminists were among the early critics of structural adjustment programmes, following closely and in parallel to the critique contained in the United Nations Children’s Fund’s volumes on the importance of putting a human face on adjustment (Cornia et al. 1987). The Women’s Tent in the Nairobi conference of 1985 that was the culmination of the United Nations Decade for Women (1975–1985) saw activists and researchers coming together with a powerful critique of the growth-focused development paradigm. The Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) network’s platform *Development, Crises, and Alternative Visions: Third World Women’s Perspectives* (Sen and Grown 1987) articulated an understanding gained through research and field-based experiences.<sup>6</sup> It was the product of what was at the time a new and unusual process of bringing women from different geographical areas, backgrounds and experiences together to develop a common understanding and analysis. The circles of interaction that DAWN used not only brought researchers and activists together but also makers and shapers of policy. As a consequence, its critique spread quickly through the wider gender and development networks.

At the same time, feminist economists began addressing the problem of engendering macroeconomics directly even as their understanding of the phenomenon of globalization and its implications for the gender division of labour grew (Benería and Roldán 1987; DAWN 1995). The growing work on engendering budgets and budget processes was a spin-off of this attention (Budlender 1996).

On the ground, women working in organizations were experiencing the feminization of poverty and deepening their understanding of the impact of macropolicies beyond the traditional social sectors, health and education. The links between macroeconomic policies, poverty and inequality, environmental sustainability, and the newly emerging concern of trade policies (and, later, the World Trade Organization/WTO) were articulated by an overwhelming number of the groups that took part in the 35,000-strong NGO Forum held in Beijing in 1995.<sup>7</sup> They also began

<sup>5</sup> In India, for example, the most important event of the decade was the participatory process that led to the landmark report, *Toward Equality: Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India* (Government of India 1974) that mapped out a terrain for research, activism and policy that lasted until the 1990s.

<sup>6</sup> For more on the DAWN network, see <http://www.dawnnet.org>.

<sup>7</sup> The United Nations conferences of the 1990s were an important catalyst that brought activists and researchers together. The importance of these large forums in making it possible for the women’s movement to impact on discourse and policy

drawing the connections to the growing crisis of violence against women and to the rise of a conservative backlash against women's autonomy and agency in the public domain. Research and activism came together powerfully and drew a promise from the new president of the World Bank that he would respond and address some of the concerns raised.<sup>8</sup> The period since Beijing has seen further strengthening of feminist analysis of trade,<sup>9</sup> and integration, albeit slowly, of women's concerns in the movement for global economic justice as represented in the World Social Forum (WSF).

### ***Sexual and reproductive health and rights***

Women's struggle for control over their bodies is currently in its second phase. The first phase occurred during the birth-control movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This movement was interwoven with the suffragist struggle for the recognition of women as citizens in Europe and North America, and to some extent the anti-colonial movements of that time,<sup>10</sup> although the relationship was by no means straightforward. The period between the first phase and the second phase that goes back to the last 30 years or so saw the population policy field and the discipline of demography grow substantially.

Population policy as it evolved in the period after the Second World War was largely Malthusian. The concern of the policy establishment in the North with protecting the North from the growing brown, yellow and black peoples of the world was barely concealed in document after document of the 1960s and 1970s. Population growth was portrayed as the single most serious threat to economic development and population control was the policy answer (Ehrlich 1971). Despite the South versus North skirmishes over the relative importance of "development" versus family planning in controlling population growth,<sup>11</sup> there was very little real challenge to this consensus about population policy.

Most demographers have had little to do with or say about the evolution of population policy. Demography developed as a largely technical discipline concerned with the calculus of birth, death and migration, with relatively little interest in social and behavioural issues.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps for this reason, not only have few demographers focused on policy questions, but the field as a whole was able to close itself off from attention to the causes and consequences of sexual and reproductive behaviour, and the social institutions, practices and norms within which that behaviour is embedded in different cultures and societies. It was not until the rise of the modern women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s that real change became possible in the field.

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cannot be minimized. Without these conferences, researchers and activists would have had to find other ways to come together, and that would not have been easy to do on the scale and with the frequency that the UN conferences made possible.

<sup>8</sup> The World Bank's president, Jim Wolfensohn, followed his promise with a series of actions to pay closer attention to gender in Bank policies.

<sup>9</sup> The International Gender and Trade Network (IGTN) was set up explicitly to assist feminists in engaging with WTO processes.

<sup>10</sup> Annie Besant, the first president of the Indian National Congress, which went on to become the main vehicle for the Indian nationalist struggle against British rule, was also a champion of women's right to birth control.

<sup>11</sup> "Development is the best contraceptive" was the South's slogan during the international population conference held in Bucharest in 1974.

<sup>12</sup> This is something of an overstatement. However, though anthropologists and other social scientists have had some space, the field is largely driven by its technical aspects.

The international women's movement had coined and been using the term "reproductive rights" for about 20 years before the paradigm shift that transformed the population field at the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo in 1994. Much of this work was motivated by activist concern to challenge coercion, human rights abuses, and unethical practices in population policies and programmes.<sup>13</sup> A strong focus of this work was to challenge the ways in which new contraceptive technologies were introduced in family planning programmes. This activism was not matched by significant feminist research effort until the 1990s. During the 1980s feminist demographers remained concerned with the question of whether and through what pathways women's education or autonomy impacted on fertility and related behaviour (Mason 1988).

The upcoming United Nations (UN) conferences of the 1990s galvanized both research and activism. The fact that the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) was coming up in Rio in 1992 acted as a major challenge to the women's movement, since many major North-based environmental groups viewed population growth as a major threat. Feminist activists began a process of consolidation of a counter-position that was articulated in the Planeta Fêmea (the women's tent in the NGO Forum of UNCED) in the presence of a large number of women from environmental organizations. In the following two years, women's organizations worked together to develop a consensus position on population policy that would bridge the considerable differences and mistrust that existed among groups from different regions and backgrounds. While some of these differences were the product of mistrust of Northern by Southern groups, there were also tensions among groups within each global pole.<sup>14</sup> A major and conscious effort at bridging gaps and building agreement was critical in allowing the women's movement to turn its attention to two tasks: the first was to negotiate an alliance with the family planning lobbies and the second was to develop the political capacity to challenge the growing bloc of religious conservatives that was being created by the Vatican. The success of the women's movement in accomplishing these two tasks is the history of ICPD.

Again, the role of research and activism combined was critical. Although somewhat slow to get off the ground, feminist research opened up the field in ways that brought new issues and concepts to the table. A new framework for population-related policy was created that affirmed women's right to control their fertility and meet their needs for safe, affordable and accessible contraceptives, while recognizing the social determinants, and health and rights consequences of sexual and reproductive behaviour.<sup>15</sup> New and radical concepts such as reproductive and sexual health and rights had to be clarified in a field that had been an "odd mixture of technocratic modelling and doomsday scenarios until then" (Antrobus and Sen 2006). A significant part of this research reflected the combined and collective effort of feminist researchers, activists and a growing number of people from the policy establishment. This again was

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<sup>13</sup> The Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights (WGNRR) was the main international organization mobilizing women at this time.

<sup>14</sup> A few women activists from the South even held demonstrations against ICPD during the actual conference.

<sup>15</sup> Dixon-Mueller 1993; Corrêa and Reichman 1994; Sen et al. 1994.



done consciously to win a place for activists at the policy table, and to build support for the paradigm shift within the policy establishment.<sup>16</sup>

### ***Human rights and violence against women***

Women's organizing in preparation for the 1993 International Conference on Human Rights in Vienna set the stage for the broadening of the human rights framework. Until then there had been two major controversies in the field of human rights. The first was the priority given by Northern governments and organizations to political rights and abuses over economic, social and cultural rights; the struggles to gain recognition for the "right to development" during the conferences of the 1990s provided continuing evidence of this imbalance. The second controversy was over the political use of human rights by powerful nations as a stick to selectively beat other countries into submission on various unrelated issues. Women's activism brought a third issue—women's human rights—squarely to the centre of the human rights debate (Bunch and Reilly 1994). With this came the question of the universality of human rights versus practices that violate women's human rights but that are upheld by some as cultural norms, for example, female genital mutilation or honour killings.

Violence against women became the lever that moved the opposition argument that there was no need for specific recognition of women's human rights. The presence of women in Vienna testifying to their experiences of violence—systematic rape and war crimes, genital cutting, domestic violence, dowry deaths, honour killings, sexual violence, to name only a few—created a climate that made it possible for violence against women to be placed for the first time on the agenda of a major human rights conference. Until then, the UN and governments had tended to treat violence against women as a private, familial or cultural matter; in many instances the official approach was to treat it as a matter of abuse of male private property<sup>17</sup> rather than an abuse of the woman's human rights. The recognition of women's rights as human rights in Vienna in 1993 also made possible the significant advances made in Cairo in 1994 and Beijing in 1995.

This struggle brought together a powerful combination of activists who could identify and document experiences, and feminist lawyers who could translate those experiences into the legal terminology and concepts needed for negotiation. This experience of working together also gave the women's movement analytical and negotiating skills and very importantly the language skills needed to become effective players in official negotiations. Women in these conferences were present not only as NGO delegates but also on official delegations; effective lobbying required rapid development of a very specific set of strategic and tactical negotiating skills that major networks developed through sheer learning by doing. Mistakes were undoubtedly made, but the ability to put tensions aside to work together and to learn from mistakes was a major reason for the effectiveness of the women's movement in these negotiations.

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<sup>16</sup> The book co-edited by Sen et al. (1994), for example, consciously eschewed creating a book in which academic researchers would write the main chapters while women activists would provide illustrative boxes—instead the process brought both groups together to plan and write the chapters.

<sup>17</sup> Viewing the wife's or daughter's body as the property of the husband/family/clan, and so on, is common in many parts of the world; its violation is treated in the law as a property violation rather than a human rights abuse.

## The Politics of Policy Advocacy

The three examples above appear to indicate a relatively smooth relationship between researchers and activists in the process of policy advocacy. This was not really so. It is true that the achievements of the women's movement in these situations were due in no small measure to the ability to work through internal differences and develop common positions. However, the differences were sometimes quite significant and often very difficult to transcend; sometimes the differences would be set aside in the face of a common "enemy" only to resurface when the situation became easier.

Three sets of issues were the source of recurring tensions between researchers and activists: issues of substance, issues of power and issues of sociology. These were not in watertight compartments moreover and would often be mixed up in practice.

*Substantive* differences often arose around the relative importance of immediate ground-level perceptions and understanding versus analytical discussion and extrapolation or abstraction. Whose "reality" has greater validity when there are differences? While such tensions are inevitable, given the varying grounds of research and activism, they have become sharper in the era of globalization. Activists continue to function by and large where they have been,<sup>18</sup> but researchers have the possibility and are more often required to compare and analyse across larger geographic spans. Their generalizations have necessarily to deal with the wider variations in ground level reality this entails.

For instance, the history of population policy has varied considerably across major continental and subcontinental lines. While the traditional concerns of activists in South Asia have been about coercive practices in family planning programmes, the problem in Africa has been one of availability of services particularly in the context of HIV/AIDS. Latin America's major problem has been one of getting services through the public sector in a political context where conservative Catholicism, including the Opus Dei, is influential.<sup>19</sup> The unwillingness of some activists in South Asia to recognize that the issue of coercion is not all there is to the demarcation of reproductive rights created major tensions before and to a lesser extent during ICPD.<sup>20</sup> It required greater flexibility and a willingness to cross boundaries, something researchers tend to do more naturally and that some activists at least found difficult. Another example of tension, on the economic front this time, was the major "crisis" that erupted in Latin America post-Beijing about the legitimacy of engaging with national or global institutions. Accusations of co-optation were in the air and issues of accountability within the movement became the hot subject of a somewhat rancorous debate.

On the surface it may appear that these were not primarily debates between researchers and activists, but between two tendencies within the women's movement. I believe nonetheless that the basis of the argument was fundamental differences in the substantive ground of experience—more local or national and specific, as associated with activism, or more global as associated with research.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Activism has also been considerably affected by the capacity to communicate with and act at broader levels. This is true not only in the global justice movement and the WSF or anti-WTO struggles but also in particular movements, for example, the Narmada Bachao Andolan's ability to link up with anti-dam supporters in Europe and North America and even testify before the United States Congress. Other activist movements have also been able to do this.

<sup>19</sup> The Opus Dei is a lay Catholic organization with close links to the Vatican; it wields considerable political power in many countries of the region.

<sup>20</sup> See footnote 13 above.

<sup>21</sup> The congruence or otherwise between research versus activism and researcher versus activist is discussed later.

These differences often translate into differences of power. Challenges to the links between knowledge and power have a long tradition in the women's movement. Power may appear to be embodied in researchers who have access to resources and connections that activists do not. In the early days of the field of gender and development, this often took the form of a South versus North divide as Northern researchers with research grants appeared in the South to write about Southern experiences.

This has changed considerably as direct links between activist organizations in the South and funding agencies have grown. Ironically, the result has been greater "research" demands (framing proposals, monitoring, analysis and report-writing) being imposed on organizations that have little capacity for research.<sup>22</sup> Activist organizations now perforce have to search for more qualified professional staff that can fulfil these requirements, and this has its own dynamic for the internal hierarchies within an organization. What has tended to happen as a result is that what used to be a struggle for power between an activist organization and external researchers has been displaced to two other levels: the level of an internal struggle within organizations, and a new form of struggle between funding agencies and organizations. The more "technicized"<sup>23</sup> form of the latter struggle makes it appear more natural and more difficult to see the shift in power relations it entails.

A more symbiotic relationship between researcher and activist is now evolving as a result. In all of the illustrations given above, this symbiosis was very much in evidence. But this does not mean that the relationships are now free of tension. As organizations attempt to develop new internal relationships between research and activism, major power struggles often develop.<sup>24</sup> All of the "chips" in these games of power are not on the side of research however. In the women's movement in particular, many organizations profess a strong ethos of collective action, of breaking power hierarchies and of empowering the activist. As laudable as these objectives may be, they have sometimes been naïve in their application, attributing achievement and capacity to inappropriate levels.<sup>25</sup> This can result in a paralytic inability to address the issue squarely. It can also lead to disillusion on the part of professional staff who are asked to go along with the practice of attributing the work *they* feel they have done to the collective, while the work done by field staff is not. Unless the place of different kinds of knowledge and their relationship to power is addressed squarely, it can leave organizations incapable of moving forward to strengthen their work. Tensions can simmer and keep resurfacing even though everyone may be willing to pull together during key moments. It can also put funding agencies or research convenors in the awkward position of having to play the arbiter, or of wielding more power as a result of the internal tension than they ought.

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<sup>22</sup> Some may argue that proposal and report writing are hardly research in a real sense, and at one level this is true. Increasingly, however, in my own experience organizations are expected to provide more analytical reports of their work, requiring them to have stronger information systems in place, to undertake surveys or at least focus group discussions, and to provide analytical grounds for grant renewals. It is also not very helpful in this context to have a very narrow definition of research; the definition I am using is broad enough to encompass different kinds and levels of analysis and theorizing.

<sup>23</sup> I am using this somewhat grotesque word to indicate that the form power takes is less transparent and direct but is mediated by questions about the adequacy of reporting or monitoring and information systems (MIS) that are more difficult to perceive as the workings of power.

<sup>24</sup> Because of the delicate nature of these internal power issues within organizations and because a fair amount of the knowledge that I have in this regard is confidential, I am not able to provide specific examples but they definitely exist and are growing.

<sup>25</sup> The author's personal communication with some thoughtful leaders of organizations, and her own experience.

A closer look at the *sociology* of research and activism may provide another perspective on these issues. Tension between researchers and activists is by no means the same or evenly distributed in different countries and regions. In some locales there is very little disagreement while in others conflict appears to lurk constantly beneath a thin veneer of solidarity. Even in the same country, some relationships are smooth while others are fraught with potential for conflict. The explanation may lie in the background and history of who researchers and activists are.

My thesis is that the potential for tension is greater when researchers and activists come from similar social and economic backgrounds, but have made different life choices early on that then affect their life trajectories and life chances. Competition may sometimes appear in the guise of disagreements over the basis of knowledge or the extent of commitment to a cause. Such competition may be more or less severe depending on whether life choices once made are difficult to alter, or whether people can move more fluidly from being a researcher to being an activist and vice versa, that is, it depends on how irrevocable the choice is.<sup>26</sup> It is not accidental, I believe, that tensions of this sort are less severe in Europe or North America (at least until recently) where the educated segment of the labour force can move with relative ease from activist organizations to research or policy analysis. The research-activism nexus is not congruent with the researcher-activist relationship. The tensions are probably most severe in Asia<sup>27</sup> where the market for educated labour is demand-constrained. Tension over the control of knowledge and who gets credit for it can be quite severe in such circumstances.

This would explain why the attempt to combine research with activism is greeted with suspicion and wariness. If the researcher begins to combine in herself field-level knowledge obtained from the ground, or if the activist develops the capacity for more rigorous analysis, it can make her a far more formidable competitor in the struggle for funds and recognition. This is particularly ironic because almost everyone in the movement would argue that it is important for researchers to have activist experience and for activists to have greater analytical capacity. This may also explain why the relationship of researchers to larger, mass- or community-based organizations (CBOs) can be easier than their relationship to smaller NGOs. The social and economic background of the large majority of activists in CBOs (although not perhaps of their leadership) is often vastly different from that of most researchers, thus reducing the perception of competing interests.

Displacement of such tensions on to the loftier ground of greater or lesser sacrifice of personal interest or commitment can only serve to conceal and confuse the real dynamic of relationships. I do not hold that all the differences that surface between research and activism are only manifestations of such displacement. But the issue is present enough and important enough that it has to be addressed in a more straightforward manner. People who work within or in support of social movements are not very different from others in their susceptibility to competitive or other pressures, although the fact that they make commitments and difficult personal choices also plays

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<sup>26</sup> This, in turn, can depend on the tightness of the labour market for educated labour and the relationship between education and jobs.

<sup>27</sup> India and the Philippines are probably good examples.

an important role in shaping who they are, and setting the ideals and norms of the organizations with which they work.<sup>28</sup>

## The Politics of Discourse

In the International Feminist Dialogue, a two-day meeting that preceded the WSF 2004 in Mumbai, there was an argument made that the language of human rights and reproductive rights has been so co-opted by powerful institutions that women's organizations should no longer use these concepts or the related frameworks. This is neither the first nor will it be the last time that such an argument is heard. Its source is frustration at the slow pace of change and mistrust of the organizations entrusted with change, or that may be the self-anointed agents of change.

All of the three illustrations provided above are based on very significant transformations in the language and content of discourse. One of them, ICPD, represented a full-scale paradigm shift, while the others witnessed major conceptual changes. How did this come about, and what is its significance for policy change? And why do some people believe that the change is temporary?

To understand the politics of discourse is to understand a key element of how research gets translated into policy and the role that activism can play, both positive and negative. The typical trajectory whenever significant changes in discourse occur is that critical research supported by activism first wages a major struggle to change old concepts and frameworks and introduce new ones. In the field of gender and development, many such struggles have been waged to gain acceptance and use for concepts such as "gender", "empowerment", "women's human rights", "reproductive and sexual health", and "sexual and reproductive rights". But such a struggle is not a once-and-for-all event. As the new frameworks and concepts begin to be used, they are also interpreted and reinterpreted to suit the predilections of the user. In the process their meanings may become more fuzzy and multivalent with different people and institutions using the same terminology in very different ways. As Humpty Dumpty said to Alice, a word can come to mean whatever the user wants it to mean!

This is the point at which two different routes can be taken. One is that chosen by the speakers in the International Feminist Dialogue who argued that it was time to drop the use of terms that have been co-opted and, by implication, corrupted and rendered bereft of transforming power. The other route is one that I believe has more potential for moving debate forward. It is to recognize that the fact that the new terms and frameworks are being taken up by the opposition is an important sign not of failure, but of success in the first level of the struggle for change. If knowledge is power, then changing the terrain of discourse is the first but very important step. It makes it possible to fight the opposition on the ground of one's choosing.<sup>29</sup>

By way of example, in the pre-ICPD days, all discussion about gender or women's autonomy had to be cast in terms of its efficacy for population control. The paradigm shift of ICPD made it possible to begin to ask entirely new questions that were not focused on population control but on the guaranteeing of rights and the meeting of

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<sup>28</sup> This discussion further develops the argument about personal change made in Edwards and Sen (2002).

<sup>29</sup> To be able to fight an enemy on the terrain of one's choosing rather than on ground chosen by the enemy is a key factor in waging a successful battle, according to Sun Tzu's *Art of War* (see Giles 1910).

needs. The terms of discourse determine both what can be asked and what cannot be asked, and how it can be asked. It is very difficult within a Malthusian discursive framework to seriously entertain questions about quality of health care or the meeting of individual health needs.

Powerful institutions understand the importance of controlling discourse only too well. It is not accidental that the rise to dominance of the Washington consensus during the 1980s and 1990s was mirrored by a very real decline in the ability of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) or other institutions outside the Bretton Woods system to find the resources for research or knowledge building.<sup>30</sup>

But winning the struggle over discourse (as happened at Vienna and Cairo) is only the first step. The greater the victory the more the likelihood that others will attempt to take over the discourse and subvert its meaning. The battle is not over; it has just begun. The real struggle to transform the new discourse into effective policy change has to move on to the level of changes in institutions, laws, practices and norms. In this struggle, terms and language will be interpreted and reinterpreted. This fact does not automatically mean co-optation. It simply means the struggle has moved on to another phase. Giving up one's concepts and frameworks at this stage is a sure guarantee of losing both the battle and the war!

Are activists or researchers more likely to follow one or the other trajectory? I do not believe that the research-activism distinction is a particularly strong predictor of behaviour in this regard. However, those who were more involved in making the change in discourse happen in the first place are more likely to want to hold on to it, and this is but natural. Those more distant from the making of discursive change and who are more interested in knowing whether it has made an impact on the ground are less likely to be patient. For the field of gender and development, much of the recent discursive change that has occurred was struggled over in the terrain of UN conferences, a locale far removed, not only physically but also in terms of cultural and sociological distance, from many in the women's movement. Those who were present when the negotiations were going on in conferences tended to be from global networks whose links to activists on the ground may be ambivalent, but whose connections to researchers may be stronger.

It may be useful to reflect here on the changes of the last few decades in the way in which social policy change occurs. I do not possess a clear understanding of the time phasing of discursive pressure versus activist mobilization on the ground in earlier historical periods. But more than the time-phasing question, the fact that changes in discourse and changes in ground-level mobilization have happened in the recent past in different geographic and political locales may be crucial. Ground-level mobilization (except perhaps for the WSF and anti-WTO rallies) still happens, by and large, at *local and national* and, possibly, at regional levels. This is especially true for the women's movement. But the struggles over language and discourse have happened in the first instance at the *global* level, particularly for many in the South. The gap between the two is literally oceanic! Great efforts have to be made to communicate the content, meanings and implications of the conceptual changes that have occurred. And this *has* to happen if activists in local and national locales are to play the role of interlocutors of governments

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<sup>30</sup> The only (and important) exception to this was the *Human Development Report*.

to ensure implementation—the changes in laws, institutions, practices and mindsets—that are necessary in the next phase.

The transformation of discourse into policy change—implementation in a word—is bound to be a time of great turmoil and clashes of interests as those who were favoured by the status quo ante are challenged. Backlashes and foot-dragging are par for this course. This is therefore also the time that requires clarity, ingenuity, flexibility and, above all, stamina on the part of those who are attempting to change social policy. Ambiguity and confusion within social movements may weaken the potential for real change. Above all, this is not the time to be backtracking on hard-won concepts and frameworks on the grounds that they have been co-opted. The need of the hour is to push hard so that actual changes can occur.

### **Implications for the Making of Social Policy Change**

How effective has the combined research and activism of the women's movement been in making an impact on social policy? The changes in discourse have been almost monumental in some instances. Changes on the ground within countries have been more mixed as might be expected, and have depended on the nature of the barriers faced and the capacity of the movement to chart a clear course for itself as the discussion in the previous section suggests.

Three sets of issues are particularly important in this regard: the nature of the "opposition"; the positions of allies; and the internal capacity and self-reflexivity of the protagonists.

In the case of gender and development, explicit opposition has come from social and religious conservatives opposed to gender equality at global, regional, national and local levels; this opposition still continues today, and is able at different times to mobilize support from powerful governments. Although the overt issue is often abortion or "family values", this is a veneer for real and implacable opposition to the very idea of gender equality. For the gender and development field, therefore, there is no compromise possible with this strand of opposition; the world-views are diametrically opposed.

The action of the BWIs has been more indirect and complex. As stated earlier, the women's movement was one of the early opponents of the Washington Consensus. Globalization, insecurity of livelihoods and inequality have proceeded in pace with the entry of women into labour markets and the breaking of traditional barriers. The BWIs are not on the same side as the social conservatives on the issue of gender equality (World Bank 2000b) but they would like to believe that their policies are favourable to women. The evidence does not however point in this direction.

The presence and articulation of these two sets of actors have shaped both research and activism on gender and development. The relationship to allies has been even more complex. On issues of reproduction, sexuality and women's human rights, the traditional family planning lobbies have in the course of the hammering out of the Vienna, Cairo and Beijing agreements become the partners of the women's movement. But not everyone among them is happy. Some family planning organizations and demographers continue to believe that ICPD was a mistake, and that a narrower focus on family planning is more likely to lead to greater funding and more effective policies. While these are a minority, some of them hold positions of power and influence.

The relationship between the women's movement and another important ally—the movement for global economic justice—is quite complex.<sup>31</sup> Some organizations and individual members of the latter believe that the women's movement represents a narrow identity politics without transformative potential. Many are reluctant to internalize the implications of the “personal as political” in their own lives. Worse, some are allied to the most implacable opponents of gender equality—the religious conservatives—in the name of a common platform on poverty eradication, debt removal or cultural conservation. Expanding its space within the global justice movement and transforming these positions has been extremely difficult for women activists, and is an ongoing struggle.<sup>32</sup>

Engaging in these relationships with allies and opponents has been essential for the field of gender and development to really be able to transform policy. But the women's movement's own capacity to engage has had many sociological limitations. Challenging the BWIs, for instance, requires familiarity with the concepts and language of mainstream economics, but very few women are actually trained as economists. Women also have relatively little experience with making policy since they have, by and large and with few exceptions, been outside the mainstream of policy institutions and structures, and even marginalized from the institutions of representative democracy. They have little experience, as a result, of the politics or mechanics of policy making and implementation. Women also have little background in negotiating power within large organizational structures such as bureaucracies or other institutions of the state, which men have dominated from time immemorial. This may result in their falling back to personalized, “familial” modes of dealing with power, with which they may feel more comfortable but that may be inappropriate and ineffective.

These weaknesses have often meant that feminist activists are more comfortable with oppositional politics that requires them to be on the streets rather than in the offices and corridors where negotiations occur and power is brokered. This is not a problem for feminists alone but for all social policy whose protagonists (Dalits, racial or ethnic minorities, indigenous peoples) have been historically marginalized from political power.

## Conclusion

The introduction to this chapter contained a set of questions about the lessons that the experience of gender and development provides for the making of social policy. Some answers have been developed although they are uneven and in some cases fragmentary. Nonetheless, there is an important set of lessons to be learned. While the experience of the women's movement certainly contains unique and special elements deriving from the nature of gender power in society, it has much to offer for a reflection on the relationship of social research to social activism.

When dominant social paradigms have to be changed, one is inevitably in the terrain of power where a combination of research, analysis and activism is essential for the protagonists of change. But the relationship between researchers and activists is by no means simple, and requires careful negotiation and great patience if it is to fulfil

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<sup>31</sup> Sen and Corrêa 2000; Petchesky 2003; Antrobus and Sen 2006.

<sup>32</sup> WSF 2004 in Mumbai witnessed many more women's panels and discussions, but real integration of a feminist voice and presence has a long way to go.



its potential. In such situations, neither research by itself nor activism by itself can bring about change in policy discourse or policy implementation. Different combinations may be necessary in different circumstances, but the two must come together nonetheless. The terrain of power in which social change movements have to operate is a complex one where opponents can be obdurate or wily, where alliances can shift like quicksand. Self-reflexivity, patience and stamina are essential ingredients for forward movement.

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