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Women's work in economic development processes

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1. Introduction. The case for gender analysis

(*)All too often development economics obscures gender distinctions. It assumes as the fundamental unit of analysis either the individual (implicity male) or the household which is taken to be the centre of unitary interests and joint decisions and efforts.

Even within frameworks of analysis that emphasise social structures and conflicts (rather than micro-level "free" choices) gender is often overlooked as a factor that, along with class position, deeply affects access to resources, consumption, life standards and political participation.

Analytical approaches that ignore gender relations fail to appreciate the diverse modes of reproduction as one of the main structural determinants within a society. By reproduction I mean not only human/ biological reproduction but the whole process through which children become socially integrated adults and the daily maintenance of the adults (see Beneria, 1976, p. 205-6, for a discussion of the concepts of reproduction). Defined in this way reproduction actually includes the production of goods and services that can be distinguished from other productive activities because they are directly used rather than exchanged. Among these goods subsistence commodities will be of primary importance in Third world countries. In fact, in societies in which the market and the division of labour are not very developed, and in which the family constitutes the productive unit, it is not valid to suggest a clear distinction between production and reproduction. Such a distinction becomes more evident in industrialised societies where there is a physical separation between the productive units and the family. Both production and reproduction constitute the material basis of society and acknowledgment of this interaction is of major importance to the understanding of the changes set in motion by a development process.

Most analytical approaches also obscure the fact that economic and social changes will affect family members -within each social group- differently in intensity and direction according to their gender, as there exist

sexual division of labour, and as relations within the family are characterized by the existence of hierarchies, conflict and role differentiation.

Given the patterns of sexual division of labour any changes in production will have a differentiated impact on male/female work burdens and paid job opportunities.

Family income gaings or losses, on the other hand will not necessarily be equally distributed among all members. Rather, the intra-family allocation of income will depend on the prevalent roles of the members who earn it. If the mother has a central role in providing the family with the needed amounts of food, gains or losses on the income she directly controls will affect food purchase more than changes in male income. In turn the proportion of male income that will be spent for family rather than individual consumption will depend on the cultural rules that define male responsabilities towards family subsistence, as well as on his position -wheter husband or son etc.- in the family.

In many African regions south of the Sahara for example (see E. Boserup, 1970, B. Agarwal, 1980) women traditionally have autonomous access to the crops they produce as independent cultivators and therefore to the cash income they can obtain by selling the surplus. Men, on the other hand, do not share responsibilities in providing subsistence for their wives and children. Thus a shift from female to male access to means of production will negatively affect women's and children's access to consumption, and this independently from the direction of absolute income levels. Boserup (1970, p. 56-63) reports how such shifts from female to male control of resources have been caused by agrarian policies carried out under colonial rule in Africa and Asia. These policies either transformed women from relatively independent cultivators to labourers dependent on their husbands for the access to land and income, or did not provide them with the funds, training, implements, that were given instead only to male farmers. In this way women were denied the opportunity to improve their yields and to have

access to cash-income. While in African regions men traditionally do not have responsibilities in providing subsistence for wives and children they do have such responsibilities in Asia and Latin America. But even there they are found to spend, relative to women, a lower proportion of their income on family consumption (Agarwal, 1980, p. 8). Besides, the relative sharing of available food between members of the family may favour men (and boys) over women and girls:

> Documentation on the sharing of food between men and women in the household is again limited, but never the less adequate to show that the actual distribution of food and nutrients tends to favour the household males relative to the females in large parts of the third world (B. Agarwal, 1980, p. 8).
>
> The senior male members of the household are frequently given the best diet in terms of both quantity and quality and boys often have priority over girls (1) (Schofield, 1979, quoted in B. Agarwal, p. 8).

To differentiate between man and women is hence essential to any theoretical or empirical insights into social structure and its changes; accordingly, gender analysis is also essential to policy prescriptions aimed at escaping poverty and underdevelopment.

My purpose in the following sections of this work will be to contribute to the understanding of the impact of development processes on women's roles and the family.

Section 2 below contains a discussion of the models of interpretation, based on western historical experience, that most influence contemporary research in Third World countries: I shall suggest some limitations of these models and propose an alternative emphasis in modelling women's work and the family in the processes of economic change.

In section 3 I shall review research carried out in Third World countries about the impact of economic-social change on women's work, particularly wage work, and asses the consistency of the empirical evidence with the

models discussed.

2. *Modelling the different impact of economic development on men and women*

Marxists and feminists, acknowledging the importance of analysing reproduction and gender relations, have provided different interpretations of the impact of capitalist development in western countries on women's roles and the family. I shall try here to give a necessarily simplified account of these interpretations, discuss their limits, and suggest a different "emphasis" for historical interpretation. The rationale for this brief exposition is twofold:

1. The historical experience of western countries can indeed provide insights and a framework for the analysis of contemporary developing countries, despite the differences brought about by their "late" develompent.

2. The "models" that I shall summarise often represent the framework within which the experience of developing countries is also interpreted. Yet their limitations in alalysing the family in western industrialisation also affect their ability to fully appreciate women's work and family roles in third world countries.

2.1 Classical marxist analysis

A. Private property the key

In the "classical" marxist analysis of the economic history of Western Europe and the United States capitalist development would have a disruptive effect on patriarchal family relation within the working class.

Private property was seen as the material basis for the existence of the family and for the control over women's sexuality, aimed at ensuring the transmission of property to the heir. The creation of a wide and ever growing proletariat, that by definition does not have any property to transmit, would destroy, within this class, the material conditions for family

existence (Engels, 1940). At the same time the growing female participation in the wage labour force would emancipate women from direct patriarchal control, even though this had to occur at the cost of the notorious conditions for women and children during the early phase of capitalist industrialisation (Engels, 1943).

B. The separation between the home and the work place

While the rise of the proletariat eliminates the material basis of patriarchal control over female sexuality the spreading of capitalist modes of production undermines the traditional functions of the family as a productive/economic unit. Homebased production of commodities and of services is gradually substituted by capitalist production, therefore displacing female labour force from the home to the capitalist labour market, creating, in this way, a reserve army for capitalist expansion.

2.2 Neomarxist corrections to the classical predictions

The classical model is flexible enough to incorporate the existence of countervailing forces. However, some of its limitations are immediately evident in the failure of its predictions.

The working class family is still there -although changed- in all advanced countries. Paradoxically, one could argue that the family is even stronger today amongst the working class than it is amongst the bourgeoisie.

Increasing female partecipation in the labour force, especially in the industrial sector, has not, until recently, been a general trend in now industrialised countries.

Finally, in avanced countries as well as in LDC5 female jobs have specific characteristics (relatively low paid, low status, part-time etc.) that can be accounted for only looking back at the family and at women's roles within it.

Such consderations have led to modifications (although not universally accepted) to what I have called the "classical" model.

Capitalist development is still seen ad having a disruptive effect on the traditional family functioning as an economic unit. However, whilst the process of proletarianization affects male workers, females, at least after the earliest phase of industrialisation, are "left behind" in the home where they carry out the new functions attributed to mothers and housewives in a capitalist system: the reproduction of a well disciplined and efficient labour force on one hand, and on the other the purchase of consumption goods.

2.3. The modern feminist interpretation

Not surprisingly, bearing in mind the dialogue between marxists and feminists on issues like the family and the subordination of women, they share the emphasis on the purely reproductive function that the family assumes in a capitalist system, and on the role of domestic labour.

However more attention is given to the consequnece of this for women's social status while the historical process is analysed stressing, along with capital interests, the specific dynamics of gender relations and conflicts. Not only is domestic labour considered to be functional to capital accumulation but it is also supposed to facilitate a male advantage in both the family and the labour market. In the former it contributes to male welfare and the exercise of power; in the latter to reduced competition and elevated male wages.

The particular emphasis feminist historical analises put on the rising rigidity of sexual division of labour and on the consequent decline of women's relative position in the family and in the larger social community may be related to the need to show, in polemic against the supposed "natural" and a-historical character of contemporary female roles, that the housewife and mother models are a recent creation, resulting from the rise of capitalist modes of production and of the bourgeois model of the family (G. Turnaturi, 1979; G. Pomata, 1980). The existence in at least some pre-industrial societies

of various forms of female autonomy and/or power and of a widespread female involvement in all productive activities, although these were mainly home-based, proves the historical nature of the existing sexual division of labour. Further, at least for some elements within the feminist movement, the stress on the negative impact of capitalist development on women's status might represent an analytical-historical justification for the anti-capitalist character of feminist political struggle. Yet this analysis, focussing on the relative position of women compared to men, tends on the one hand to romanticize the pre-industrial world forgetting the importance of the absolute level of poverty that is known in most pre-industrial societies. On the other hand it also underestimates the fact that the important role of women in home-based production, which is quite a heavy work burden, may not necessarily be a source of women's power and/or autonomy. Whether it will be depends on production/reproduction organisation and on the prevalent cultural rules and might not therefore correspond to (more) egalitarian gender relations within the family and the social community.

2.4. An alternative emphasis on the transitional "phase"

Two related questions should be asked, bearing in mind the historical experience of industrialisation, about the previous interpretations. Has the full-time housewife model ever been really prevalent in working class families? Has the separation between home and production ever been actually completed in western countries?

Female contribution to family income has been -and in many cases still probably is- crucial to guarantee a decent life standard to working class families (Barret and MacIntosh, 1980; Scott and Tilly, 1975). First, female labour has been extensive in many industries during industrialisation, the obvious but not historically unique example being textiles. Women's involvement in metal processing, pottery and even coal mining is less well known but well documented (A. John, 1980; J. Humphries, 1982). Secondly, women

took their opportunities to earn a cash income by entering activities which, although not usually recognised ad "modern", were in fact the result of capitalist development and urbanisation. Amongst such activities domestic service for the families of the rising urban bourgeoisie was of primary importance in employing women. The demand for domestic servants in urban areas has been large and ever growing up to the first decade of the 20th century (Scott and Tilly, 1978; Pomata 1980). Thus housewives were not typical in working class families till the late decades of the nineteenth century, and after that probably a status-symbol only for the labour aristocracy (Barret and McIntosh, 1980).

The separation between the home and the work place has been a long-term process and not necessarily disruptive of previous family relations and of the perception of the family as the basic economic unit to which all individual members contribute. Rather, the family, also in its productive role, can be seen to relate in various ways to the rising capitalist modes of production.

1. For a long "phase" of capitalist development home-based production has not been entirely eliminated, but integrated through the putting out system into the capitalist trade (D. Bythell, 1969).
2. The whole family, with its internal authority structures has been transferred, in early western industrialisation, from the home to the firm, whilst still functioning as the basic productive unit (J. Humphries, 1981).
3. Not only have family traditional relations been used and integrated within capitalist enterprises. They have also had a dynamic role in promoting capital accumulation and male entrepreuneurship. The possibility of using family labour and/or the fact that other members contribute their incomes to the family gives the chance to the male head of the family to start relatively small scale businesses and enterprises that may have an important role in a process of capitalist development (M. Paci, 1980).
4. The participation of individual members of the family in the wage labour

force or in other market activities did not necessarily represent a break with traditional family ties and rules. On the contrary female (especially daughter's) participation in industrial work and migration to town can be interpreted as an adaptation to the changing economic conditions of the typical pre-industrial family behaviour (Scott and Tilly, 1975 and 1978; Pomata 1979). It is interesting that we find strikingly similar accounts of the family ties of young female industrial workers both during European industrialisation (Scott and Tilly 1975) and now in the developing countries (A.K. Wong 1981; L. Arizipe and J. Aranda, 1981). Therefore wage labour may go together with a permanence of patriarchal control over women and may not even guarantee women's autonomous access to, and allocation of, all or part of their earned income.

Changes in the behavioural patterns of families take place only gradually, adapting to changed economic structures and at the same time contributing to shaping the transformed society as it emerges; it is mainly these aspects of western historical experience that one schould bear in mind when evaluating LDCs development and its impact on women. Certainly there are bound to be differences, as their patterns of development will be conditioned by the existing international division of labour, and by the imports of technology as well as cultural models from "advanced" countries. What we would expect to find however is that women, especially those belonging to the poorer social groups, will be involved in the spread of capitalist modes of production and in the new working opportunities created by it; yet the features of this involvement will still be shaped by their roles within the family.

3. Reevaluating the existing empirical work

In this section I shall discuss the evidence and the analytical frameworks emerging from some case studies dealing with the impact on women of two specific aspects of development: (1) the introduction of new technologies and of capitalist relations of production in the countryside; (2) industria-

lisation and female participation in the industrial labour force.

As social and gender relations in agriculture production are most diverse across regions and countries I shall treat the first points with specific reference to the Indian experience, about which there is a particular wealth of research.

3.1. Economic change in rural areas: "Green Revolution" in the Indian countryside.

A large amount of research and case studies have analysed the characteristics of the new technologies introduced in the Asian countryside and their impact on rural employment, living standards etc.. Of great help for this work some of these studies attempt an investigation of their effects on women. I shall then try, after a brief description of technical changes, to review their main results.

A. Description of the new technologies

The innovations that have characterised technical change in (asian) rural areas are usually divided into two main categories:

1. - A biochemical "package" of innovations such as the introduction or improvement of irrigation, and the use of high yeilding variety seeds (HYVs) and fertilisers. These kinds of innovations are yield-increasing, land-saving and labour-using.
2. - Mechanised inputs such as combine harvesters, wheat threshers, reapers, maize shellers, rice and maize mills, tractors (for ploughing and transport use). All these inputs, with the exception of tractors, undoubtedly have a direct displacement effect on labour and do not directly improve output. The impact of tractors on labour, land-use and output have been the subject of very lengthy debates that lie outside the scope of this paper. I shall then assume, in accordance with Agarwal's conclusion (1980, p. 12) that their overall effect cannot be stated "a priori" depending on types of production and ecological and sociological conditions.

These innovations are generally associated with, and tend to accelerate, capital accumulation, implying changes in land holding and social structure.

The effects of the two types of innovations described above are often analysed independently, sometimes with the purpose of arguing for the desirability of the biochemical inputs as opposed to the (potentially negative) effects of mechanisation, namely labour displacement and polarisation in land holding, social structure, and income distribution. But, however analytically useful it might be to examine separately the tendencies resulting from the introduction of the two different input "packages", one should bear in mind that there are important economic forces that tend to link together the two types of innovations; although they certainly can be, in some areas and certain circumstances, introduced independently from each other.

The introduction of biochemical innovations not only increases the overall demand for labour but also requires -especially when multiple cropping is introduced- a precise timing and quick accomplishment of seasonal operations. This fact together with labour markets that are usually tight during seasonal peak periods, implies risks for large farmers, which represent a strong incentive for mechanisation. (Byres 1981).

On the other hand some form of mechanisation may be a necessary pre-condition for the adoption of HYYs and particularly for more intensive cropping, as it may remove constraints -such as hired labour supervision problems (A. Sen., 1981); peak labour shortages (Byres, 1981; Ahmed, 1981); draught power bottle-necks (Bardhan, 1977); risks linked to rigid timing of seasonal operations -to the introduction of these biochemical output-increasing techniques. Therefore the actual impact of technical innovations on the labour market and rural social differentiation will result from the continuation of the two types of innovations implemented.

A tendency towards polarisation in landholding and increase in wage-

-labour supply is universally recognised, while the effects on overall employment and real wages seem to be harder to assess, and may vary across regions.

B. Technical change and female participation in rural labour force.

As far as women are concerned, the ongoing process of proletarianisation -by which previously self-sufficient land cultivating households become landless or more dependent on wage incomes- will tend to increase female supply of wage labour; the statistical evidence points to the much higher rates of participation in the labour force of women from landless or very small cultivating households than of women from better off social strata (G. Sen., 1982, p. 43).

On the other hand, some relatively autonomous land cultivating households can have access to the new inputs because of their preferential resource position. The gains in income they obtain with the introduction of the new technologies may affect the working activities of women belonging to these households in different ways. If the increase in family income is high enough to allow hiring in labour, women's work on the family farm will decrease because of the "status" image linked to their non-participation in the field work (B. Agarwal, 1980). On the other hand the longer working hours associated with HYV seeds and more intensive cropping might require a higher female field work participation on the family farm. Alternatively the "financial intentity" of the new techniques may induce the female members of the family to hire out thier labour in order to provide the cash needed for the cultivation of the family farm (G. Sen., 1980).

At this point, the effect of the new technologies on the demand for female wage labour must be assessed.

Clear cut general trends cannot be derived from the case studies. Nevertheless in the regions analysed by the case studies[2]: Haryana/Punjab (G. Sen., 1982, pp. 34-47); Andhra Pradesh and Tamilnadu (B. Argarwal, 1980, pp. 37-54), a higher demand for female hired labour has been found[3] -both in absolute and as a proportion of the total labour force- as a consequence of the diffusion of HYVs cultivation, associated also to some degree of mechanisation.

In general, since there is sexual division of labour within the agricultural labour process, hence segmentation in the labour market, female employment (overall and as a proportion of the labour force) will be affected according to the impact of technical change on specifically female tasks in the farming labour process. Generally HYV seeds require greater care and work in sowing, weeding and transplanting that are usually performed by women.

The higher cropping intensity and output -associated with HYVs as well as with mechanisation -also increase the demand for female labour both in the already mentioned tasks and in harvesting and threshing operations for which women are usually hired. Post-production and processing mechanised inputs however tend to displace labour often performed mainly by women.

An assumption commonly made is that a decrease in labour demand -either in the labour market as a whole or in tasks where men and women are usually both employed together- will have a harsher negative impact on female employment because women function as a "Buffer" in the labour force (see for ex G. Sen, 1982, p. 40 and Dewan, Sawant, 1979, p. 1096). Yet usually this hypothesis is fomulated without providing adequate empirical support and/or analytical explanations: why should women be hired only after men? Is it because of the strenght of ideology and social pressures, or because of different characteristics of female labour or ...? Further, the existence of a high sexual specificity of the tasks performed by the workers, acknowledged by all the existing empirical research, represents a quite strong argument against the substitutability between male and female workers which is implyed by the "buffer" hypothesis. As it is presented this assumption sounds like an "a priori" statement, that seems to be drawn from the view that women are "marginal" to the process of economic change.

C. Rural development and the relative position of women in the labour

market

The empirical evidence from the case studies discussed does not support a general decline in female participation in the labour force both in absolute terms and/or as a proportion of total labour force; on the contrary, the evidence shows an increase in female employment and rates of participation to the labour force.

Yet a process of differentiation is occurring between female employment and male employment that might affect the relative status of women in the labour market.

In some areas a shift in the balance between permanent and casual work in favour of the former has been found to take place as a consequence of technical change (G. Sen, 1982, K. Bardhan, 1977). Such a shift can be accounted for by the introduction of multiple cropping which brings about a reduction in slack periods and risks connected to the need of quick accomplishment of the seasonal operations, especially in areas where the labour market tends to be seasonally tight. While this shift cannot be said to be negative per se, it may negatively effect women's employment opportunities and relative economic status as they are generally found to be excluded from the permanent employment which guarantees higher security and higher incomes.

An increase in female/male wage differentials seems to occur, in some arreas, as a consequence of the introduction of new technologies and penetration of capitalist relations of production (G. Sen, 1982, Sawant and Dewan, 1979).

According to G. Sen (1982) such an increase follows a narrowing of the tasks performed by female labourers due to the already mentioned shift from casual to permanent labour and to the fact that the new mechanical inputs may displace traditionally female tasks while only men enter the new jobs created. As a consequence there is an "overcrowding" of female labour supply in the few jobs for which females are hired. Actually, the

"overcrowding" hypothesis as an explanation for rising wage differentials does not seem consistent with the observed (by G. Sen, 1982) increase in female total employment in the region studied (Haryana), unless one assumes that the supply of female labour in the labour market-and given the segmentation of this market for the female jobs -has increased more than the total demand for female workers. The relevant evidence is not mentioned in the article, but would be consistent with the expectation that polarisation in land holding, higher dependence on cash-income and market goods and greater landlessess tend to push women into the labour market.

D. Relevance of interpretations to the empirical evidence

What conclusions can be drawn from the evidence that I have tried to summarise and how do they fit in the "models" described in the previous section?

The impression one gets reviewing the case studies about changing women's roles in Third World coutries is that their authors tend to superimpose either the 'marxist' or the 'neomarxist' and 'feminist' interpretations (as defined in sect. 2) on empirical results which are sometimes not entirely consistent with this models; on the other hand it seems that the empirical findings may conform to the more problematic notion of the 'transitional phase' developed in the previous section.

Agarwal (1980, p. 30), summing up her analytical section, emphasises the negative impact of technical change and capitalist development on women's relative position: "... women ... in relative if not in absolute terms, typically are left worse off, or less better off, than the men of their culture and class". Yet this conclusion does not perfectly fit with her own analysis and empirical findings. These on the one hand do not show a deterioration of women's absolute position in terms of direct access to income -as there are increases in female employment and real wages- on the other hand do not provide any clear evidence of a decline in women's relative position, but at most of a permanence of pre-existing gender inequalities. In fact

her conclusion seems also somehow to contrast with her right, prior contention that:

> we need to view the initiation of a new agricultural modernisation scheme or the adoption of a new agricultural technology in the context of a situation where usually:
>
> (a) there is already an unequal (often highly unequal) distribution of the ownership of and control over material resources between households;
>
> (b) women in the poorer (landless and small cultivator) households already have a high work burden both in absolute terms and relative to the men;
>
> (c) the division of income and consumption within the household are in women's disfavour;
>
> (d) a number of the poor households are headed by women with sole responsability for the upkeep of their families, and often without any ready access to land or capital (B. Argwal, 1980, p. 11).

Although the rise of capitalist modes of production does not lead to sexual equality some of the empirical evidence discussed might suggest that, in some of the "Green Revolution" areas, the increased demand for labour may have a positive effect, for ex., precisely on the mentioned female headed households, or might -although not necessarily- help to enforce female control on (part of) family income and its distribution.

In one of the introductory questions posed by G. Sen the notion of an opposition between, on the one hand, the development of capitalist relations and women's involvement in such relations and, on the other hand, the persistence of patriarchal family ties is expressed:

> Either the economic pressures of involvement in commodity production for sale and of proletarianisation may force a breakdown of the proscriptions on women's participation in work outside the home, or patriarchal domination is powerful enough to withstand such forces (G. Sen, 1982, p. 30).

Yet in the same article we find two rather interesting examples:

(1) for seasonal operations, the family as a whole is often hired in rather than the single individual (G. Sen, 1982, p. 46); (2) given the higher penetration of market relations and the "financial intensity" of the new farming methods female wage work is used for ensuring the ongoing capacity of small farm to use and profit from the new technology.

These suggest that female wage work does not necessarily imply a break of pre-existing patriarchal control and of the ties that link together the members of a family still functioning as a basic unit of production.

In fact G. Sen concludes her work with a set of questions that I also would like to propose as a conclusion to this discussion:

> ... Are relations of subordination eased or strengthened by women participation in wage labour? Do women workers become more or less dependent on male household members? Does this vary by class for different rural household? How is it affected by workers and small peasant organisations? by women's militancy? How does women's participation in wage labour affect the sexual division of labour within the home in tasks such as cooking cleaning and childcare? Such studies are both extremely necessary and only just beginning in India (G. Sen, 1982, pp.56-57).

3.2. Female participation to the industrial labour force

While women's roles in production activities in rural areas are extremely diverse over time and across regions, the characteristics of their participation in the industrial labour force are strikingly similar even in countries and societies that are, in other respects, very differentiated. Accordingly, I shall not discuss here the experience of a specific country or region but rather review the common features of female participation in the industrial labour force in developing countries as they emerge from a number of empirical and analytical studies.

The analysis of female participation in industrial work shows the inadequacy of either a "female exclusion from the development process" view

or a "industrialisation distruptive of previous family ties" thesis.

Women are not excluded from the "core" industrial labour force and only confined to "informal" small scale activities. But also they are not fully integrated in all industrial sectors and jobs. Rather we find a dominantly female labour force in those industries (or within each industry, in the sub--sections of the labour process) where the share of the labour costs on total costs is high (i.e. they are labour intensive) and where therefore "cheap labour" is of crucial importance (Elson and Pearson, 1981, Safa, 1981; Joekes, 1982). Female industries are also usually chacterised by: (1) "easy entry" and high competivity because of their relatively simple technologies, and (2) by relatively unstable product markets. Both these characteristics have a negative effect on the capacity, in these industries, to "modernise" the labour process in the direction of a lower labour intensity. Besides, the high degree of competitivity represents a further incentive to keep labour costs very low, while the instability of product demand requires the possibility of a "flexible" use of the labour force. Such female industries, just like their counterparts in "advanced" countries in this respect, are particularly: clothing and textile, usually very important in the countries in the process of industrialisation, and electronics, wich is very developed especially in South East Asia. Where female sectors represent a major share of total industrial employment we find very high female rates of participation, (A.K. Kong, 1981) even in areas characterised by high male unemployment (L. Arizipe and J. Aranda, 1981).

Significantly Arizipe and Aranda title their article: "The comparative advantages of women's disadvantages": women do not play in the industrial labour market a purely "residual" "buffer" role, being pulled in only when the labour force is tight. In fact in some industrial sectors or stages of the labour process female workers are preferred to male workers because of specific characteristics that differentiate their labour from male labour (see S.P. Joekes, 1982; A.K. Kong, 1981; H.I. Safa, 1981; D. Earson and R.

Pearson, 1981). Such characteristics -particularly cheapness, "docility" and unvalued skills- can be accounted for only in relation to women's roles and subordinate position in the family.

Do relatively high work opportunities for women enhance their autonomy?

Arizipe and Aranda, (1981) in their case study on Mexican border areas find-in a situation of very high female participation as wage workers in the local "agribusiness" along with high male unemploymentsome increases in the proportion of female-headed households and in the number of divorces. Yet the persisting contradiction between female reproductive roles (one must not forget the still very high rates of fertility in Third World countries) and industrial work discipline prevent many married-mother women from getting jobs in the industrial sector. Case studies relative to different countries all describe the female industrial labour force as -predominantly- very young and most often unmarried, being sent to the factory by the family of origin to wich they contribute almost all of their wages. In this respect their participation in wage labour is not distruptive -at least not up to now- of family ties; rather, it is part of the family's strategies of survival adapting to changed economic conditions.

In this sense, as I had already noted in sect. 2 above, the experience of Third World countries seem to be very similar to the accounts we have about female workers in the european industrial revolution (see Scottand Tilly, 1975 and 1978).

The "paternalistic" control which female workers are often subject to at the work place (A.K. Wong, 1981), their position in the family, the fact that they see their work as temporary, and their low bargaining power as a consequence of the labour process characteristics discussed above (labour intensity, high competitivity amongst capitalists), make trade union militancy and political participation of these female workers much less likely and/or more easily repressed when, despite all these factors, they arise.

The low-paid unstable nature of female employment in these industries gives rise to a contradiction -in terms of possible policy targets to improve women's status in a market economy- between the rise in their earning opportunities because of the expansion of "female" industries, and the fact that these industries are female exactly because women -given their social position and family roles- represent a cheaper (and possibly more "flexible" and docile) labour force.

These problems are accentuated by the multinational export-oriented character of many of the textile and electronic plants situated in Third World countries. Their international mobility and the fact they have no links with the internal domestic market facilitate their response to trade unionism and/or regulations concerning working contracts, allowing them to just displace their productive units in other areas, or alternatively to pressure indigenous governments into repressive labour policies.

4. Conclusion

Development economics usually assumes as the unit of its analysis either the individual or a unitary and undifferentiated household.

I have argued that understanding gender relations is necessary both for analytical and policy prescription purposes. This, on the one hand, because the organisation of reproduction, along with the modes of production, is a main factor featuring any society; on the other hand because the family is in fact characterised by role differentiation between the sexes, by sessual division of labour and by unequal distribution of income and consumption goods.

Given such differentiation it is of crucial importance to investigate howeconomic changes specifically affect the access to resources and means of production, and the earning opportunities of the female members of the family.

The studies that attempt an analysis of women's roles in a process

of development often adopt 'models' of interpretation which have been elaborated to analyse the historical experience of western countries. Accordingly, these studies either tend to conclude that women in Third World countries are 'left behind' in the home, and at the margin of the process of development (see for instance E. Boserup's 'classic' work), or they interpret female participation in the wage labour force as potentially disruptive of patriarchal relations.

Indeed the evidence from the case studies discussed fits better with the 'alternative model' of historical interpretation proposed: in a process of develompment family traditional productive functions and internal hierarchies are not disrupted, but rather interact with the rising capitalist modes of production; also, the working activities of women belonging to the poorer social groups remain crucial for their families living standards.

The rise of capitalist modes of production and the expansion of market relations increase women's willingness to participate in the labour force both in rural and industrial areas. At the same time the process of economic change often increases their working opportunities. Both in rural and urban areas female wage work goes along with a persistence of traditional family ties and the perception of the family as the basic economic unit. Female participation in paid work is also characterized by high and sometimes increasing gender inequality (lower wages, job segregation) which in turn can be explained only in relation with female roles and subordination within the family.

Economic policies may improve women's condition -or at least avoid a male bias- by giving them access to means of production, credit, training and education, or by promoting their participation to all types of jobs. Yet such policies would risk failure if they do not face at the same time the issue posed by women's roles in reproduction and by the existence of patriarchal relations within the family.

NOTES

(*) I whish to thank Dr. Jane Humphries for supervising me while working at this paper. The responsibility for its content is obviously only mine.

(1) Interestingly the same author comments as follows:

> "... men, even allowing for their higher energy requirements, receive an unfair share of the total family food (Schofield, 1979, p. 85, quoted in Agarwal, 1980, p. 8).

This quotation is of interest as it makes the point usually found in the literature on nutrition i.e. that men actually need higher calory/energy intakes than women so that some degree of unequal food distribution between the sexes would be justified by this difference. But the higher male energy requirements may be argued only if one fails to fully account for the wide range of tasks, often very heavy, performed by women in Third World countries and along with that, for the particular female nutritional requirements following their frequent child bearing and often very lengthy breast feeding periods. Agarwal (1980) provides contrary evidence that the long working hours women are found to perform compared to men, in addition to child bearing indicate higher nutritional needs for females.

(2) The works I shall mainly refer to are:
(a) G. Sen's "Women workers and the Green Revolution" (1982). This is a review of the relevant existing literature on Indian countryside. It is divided into two main sections: the first one discusses the impact of rural socio--economic change on women in Haryana/Punjab using a cross-section comparison between areas with different degrees of agricultural development, i.e. of HYVs diffusion; the second one analyses historical evidence for the district of Thanjavur (Tamilnadu).
(b) B. Argwal's: "Technological change and rural women in Third World agriculture" (1980). This work contains an analytical section based, besides her own field work, on the existing literature, and an empirical analysis section in which she summarises the results of sample surveys made in paddy-growing areas of Andhra Pradesh and Tamilnadu.

(3) The only exception to this pattern is the district of Thanjavur (Tamilnadu). Here -because of a high surplus of the available labour force- women seem to be pushed out the labour market (G. Sen, 1982). However, statistical evidence supporting this point is not mentioned.

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