



# Policy and Research Paper N°5

Women's Roles and Demographic Change in Sub-Saharan Africa  
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## Introduction

Policy & Research Papers are primarily directed to policy makers at all levels. They should also be of interest to the educated public and to the academic community. The policy monographs give, in simple non-technical language, a synthetic overview of the main policy implications identified by the Committees and Working Groups. The contents are therefore strictly based on the papers and discussions of these seminars. For ease of reading no specific references to individual papers is given in the text. However the programme of the seminar and a listing of all the papers presented is given at the end of the monograph.

This policy monograph is based on a number of the scientific papers presented and discussed at several scientific meetings sponsored by the IUSSP, as well as on some of the relevant papers presented at the IUSSP General Conference held in Montreal in 1993.

- The Committee on Gender and Population of the IUSSP, in collaboration with the Institut Français de Recherche Scientifique pour le Développement en Coopération, ORSTOM, held a Seminar on Women and Demographic Change in Sub-Saharan Africa in Dakar, Senegal in March 1993.

A major objective of the seminar was to explore possible linkages between several aspects of women's status as workers, wives, mothers and citizens and a variety of demographic and environmental phenomena.

- In 1988 the Committee had already held a global Conference on Women's Position and Demographic Change in the Course of Development in Asker near Oslo, Norway. This Conference was jointly sponsored with the Norwegian Demographic Society, the Nordic Demographic Society and the International Commission for Historical Demography.
- Another rich source of information, insights and debate on related themes and evidence was the regional conference of the IUSSP held in Dakar, Senegal, in 1988 and hosted jointly with the newly formed Union of African Population Studies.

## Analytical Problems and Hypotheses

For two decades or more there has been growing interest in exploring and documenting potential links between several demographic phenomena and various aspects of the changing position and associated status attributes (economic, social and political) of women's roles as workers (inside and outside the home), wives, mothers, kin, citizens and others.

Relevant scientific evidence of various kinds has been accumulating and subjected to analysis. The tasks involved, however, are complex and require an informed concern for the diverse and changing socio-cultural and political/economic institutional contexts, within which the positions, roles and associated statuses are embedded.

Among the frequently used indicators of women's position are women's control over various resources compared to that of men; the degree of their autonomy from men; or other aspects of their privileges or oppression intrinsic in social institutions. Such an approach takes a gendered perspective, in which the measure of comparison is men in women's own society.

Another common mode of analysis is to compare the resources available to women, such as education and occupations. These are frequently compared across cultures, to contrast the situations of women in different countries, socio-economic classes and ethnic groups.

Several possible relationships between women's position and the fertility and mortality transitions have been posited. Among them are the following:

1. Change in women's position directly contributes to the mortality or fertility transition. In this model an increase in women's autonomy, independence or control of resources is perceived as leading to a lowering in fertility and mortality. This seems to be the model of change which people have in mind when they argue that improving the 'status' of women will lead to a lowering of fertility or infant and child mortality rates.
2. Change in women's position is an intervening variable which explains why other variables lead to the mortality or fertility transition. This is the type of model in which, for instance, education for girls leads to greater female autonomy, which may in turn lead to lower fertility or mortality. If this happens, a policy to improve girls' access to schooling may simultaneously affect the desired demographic change and improve the position of women.
3. The pre-existing nature of women's position conditions the impact of other factors on the mortality or fertility transition. This model suggests that it is not necessary for the situation of women to change in order for their position to play an important role in the decline of fertility or mortality.
4. Change in women's position is determined by the mortality or fertility transition, not vice versa.

In fact an examination of the available empirical literature demonstrates a conceptual disarray within the field and serious problems of research design and operationalization. A primary problem is often the vague nature of attempts to describe women's position and at the same time a multitude of terms used to describe and define it. A second problem is that of measurement. Accordingly, the unsolved problems of definition, measurement and comparison of female 'status' attributes still remain critical for most scholars in this field.

This means that there are major tasks still to be undertaken by scholars from several population disciplines. These tasks include improved definition of individual role attributes and development of suitable multiple indices of aspects of the associated statuses, which can be used for purposes of measurement and comparison.

These indices should be able to be manipulated in quantitative, as well as qualitative, comparative studies in the region. They will need to capture changes taking place in status attributes of several changing roles: maternal, occupational, conjugal, kin, domestic, community, among others.

Yet another concern is how to integrate demographic analysis into studies that are concerned with the study and explanation of the changing social institutions in which gender roles are embedded. These include systems of production and reproduction.

Furthermore, measuring demographic changes, given the data existing in the region, normally means comparing two survey results at relatively aggregate levels. There are few cases in which such comparable data sets are available at two or more points in time. Furthermore, the aggregate data may hide substantial behavioural changes which may have occurred in a subgroup of the population. Linking such changes to various status attributes may mean practically inventing the levels of aggregation at which the relationship should be studied.

### **Box 3: Women's Roles and Statuses: Common Proxies and Problems**

*To date the most common proxies used to represent female roles and associated status attributes in cross-national, comparative survey analyses have included number of years of school attendance and type of employment. This is partially the consequence of these facts being most readily available in socioeconomic surveys, censuses and other sources.*

*However, the information on economic activity in such surveys is itself often flawed, calling into question the validity of such endeavours. Moreover there is only fragmentary evidence relating economic activity to control or allocation of scarce and needed household resources.*

*Additional problems are the levels of aggregation at which analysis is performed and the types of units which are used for comparative purposes and the cross-sectional nature of most studies.*

In view of the many conceptual and methodological problems, it has proved very difficult to test or support hypotheses focusing on possible changes taking place over time. For example, the status of women as measured by educational level and employment situation in a demographic survey is defined at the individual level and implies that the range of 'statuses' found in the sample surveys is as varied as the values of the proxy variables. Moreover relatively few girls or women have enjoyed secondary level or higher education. But it is often only at such levels of educational experience or achievement that schooling appears to have a noticeable effect on such outcomes as numbers of children born (negative) or their rates of survival (positive).

What is more, women in a given society, whether educated or employed, may have a relatively low legal status vis-à-vis husbands, brothers and others. They may in fact, despite their education and income-earning, remain perpetual legal minors, with limited ability to make major life decisions or to enter contracts and without direct access to major forms of sustenance, such as land, labour and capital.

Furthermore, few women in Africa have salaried or waged employment outside the familial context. The rest live predominantly in familial contexts of reproduction and production. These familial contexts are dominated by a variety of traditional institutions, including marriage institutions. The changing and frequently disputed norms, beliefs and practices within these institutions do much to shape their lives.

## The Development of Data Bases

This monograph does not intend to recount all technical, conceptual and methodological problems, and efforts to solve them, in studies of women's roles and demographic issues in Africa. Nor is it the goal to enumerate or synthesize all the detailed findings in the many empirical studies carried out in the past decade.

These are studies which have used a range of frames of reference. They have been undertaken by demographers, economists, anthropologists, geographers, psychologists, statisticians, political scientists and others.

The critical task is to identify and highlight evidence which points to some of the major aspects of women's changing roles and status attributes - which appear to be critically pertinent to the documentation and explanation of demographic change and lack of change - and to the design and development of national population policies and programmes.

There have been a number of attempts to answer important policy-related questions over the past two decades - especially questions about the reproductive outcomes of relationships between women and men. They have served as spurs to a variety of major demographic enquiries. Several major surveys and a multitude of different types of small studies have attempted to explore some of the factors affecting timing and quantity of births and the health and survival prospects of mothers and their offspring. These major multi-country surveys include the World Fertility Survey (WFS), the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and the Contraceptive Prevalence Surveys (CPS). Other studies have collated and examined the available evidence and devised estimates on rates of maternal mortality and morbidity [see the work of the World Health Organization (WHO)]. The International Labour Office (ILO) has assembled evidence on women's economic activities.

Unfortunately, data on productive and reproductive activities have been demonstrated to be flawed, and in many cases fragmentary. This has often resulted in dependence upon educated guesses. Moreover, data collection has often been sex-biased, in that records of reproductive activities have focused on females, while the economic activities of men have been generally better recorded than those of women. Despite these shortcomings, research efforts have led to several important developments. The latter have included the design of new measurement tools (for example, to measure maternal mortality - the sisterhood method); the construction of several series of survey data bases and more or less successful attempts to penetrate some of the past disciplinary barriers.

As a result of these endeavours, a wide-ranging multidisciplinary field of gender issues in relation to population and development policies has developed. Furthermore, the exclusive emphasis on women has been replaced by a more balanced approach, one which views females and males simultaneously, recognizing that the divisions of tasks, resources, responsibilities and rights between them is culturally embedded and varies from social group to social group. This development of a rich research field over the past two decades has led to a marked increase in policy-related facts and analyses.

A major and unfortunate gap is the widespread lack of nationally representative or comparative demographic data sets, which can successfully link productive and reproductive activities of women or men and at the same time give some indication of what is happening to the crucial familial roles of spouses, parents and kin.

The household frameworks generally adopted for much data collection and analysis are recognized as having serious shortcomings. Meanwhile most of the demographic surveys, which get information on timing of births and child survival rates, have normally omitted information on the material and familial contexts of production and provision, within which these demographic events are occurring. In addition there is as yet inadequate documentation or understanding of the processes whereby fertility and mortality are impacted by labour migration.

Despite the rapid growth of this research field, many aspects of legal, political and economic status, which are vital to the demographic outcomes, lack comparative cross-cultural documentation. They remain only partially explored. These include, for example, legal rights concerning property and persons and the relative safety and protection from assault and violence afforded by community institutions and sanctions.

Aspects of community services, such as the relative costs of access to health and family planning facilities, have been better studied, especially as a consequence of the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS). In addition, the growing recognition of the escalating threats posed by the AIDS pandemic has expanded the study of other aspects of women's and men's status attributes and behaviour. These include sexual relations and reproductive health, and the associated behaviour and knowledge, which intimately impinge upon reproductive health, fertility and survival. Thus a growing number of studies are attempting to document behavioural correlates of sexually transmitted disease and death, including HIV/AIDS.

#### **Box 4: The Growing Emphasis on Socio-cultural Perspectives**

*The IUSSP has been one of the institutions in the vanguard of attempts to make demographic enquiries more culturally informed and aware, rooted in ethnographic facts and socioculturally sensitive.*

*The marked emphasis on socio-cultural issues in the deliberations and publications of the Committee on Gender Issues attests to the recognition that women's roles and gender issues are essentially culturally-embedded and -defined phenomena which need to be examined in a cross-culturally comparative and sensitive manner.*

*In addition, the IUSSP has established a Committee on Anthropological Demography, and there is greater emphasis on anthropological approaches, methods and perspectives in demography and population economics. This is reflected by the growing numbers of anthropologists who have become members of the Union, a development which occurred over the past two decades.*

In sum, despite considerable progress, recent overviews have concluded that much remains to be done if policy research is to fulfil its mission and respond to an array of urgent needs. These urgent needs include:

1. providing the guidance needed by national planners and policy-makers as they develop population, development and health policies and programmes in the context of stringent budgets, particularly through the demonstration of the close interrelationships between women's roles, 'gender issues' and the achievement of population and development policy goals;
2. providing assistance to non-governmental organizations as they attempt to mobilize energy and resources to design and replicate successful action initiatives which will empower women as well as men, to promote lower levels of morbidity and mortality and to harmonize reproductive and productive goals, responsibilities and activities at the individual, household and national level.
3. making relevant information on women's roles, gender issues and population available to the donor community. Without their timely assistance, many governmental and non-governmental programmes would scarcely be conceived or realized.

## **Demographic Facts: Reproduction and Survival**

Economic and demographic data for sub-Saharan Africa reveal many grim realities. These include unacceptably high levels of poverty, disease and death, in continuing contexts of high fertility, rapid population growth and high rates of child dependency. Various sets of evidence show that living and working conditions are continuing to deteriorate as a result of economic recession, fiscal austerity and political mismanagement. For example, per capita incomes are below levels of 25 years ago, and according to current projections poverty, already widespread, is likely to increase by 50 per cent between 1985 and the year 2000. Impoverishment is already widespread.

As a consequence sub-Saharan African countries rank low on most indicators of socio-economic well-being, including the UNDP Human Development Index (HDI). Indeed many African countries, reflecting the low level of social development, rank comparatively lower on the HDI than in terms of income per capita. Two-thirds of the countries where there has been least progress in the HDI (even deterioration) in the last two decades, are sub-Saharan countries.

One of the most striking features in Africa over the period 1970 to 1990, in comparison with other developing regions, has been the stability of the high fertility pattern. Estimates of regional fertility trends hide some variations, including a rise in the fertility level in a few countries (including Gabon, Guinea and Mali) and a notable decrease in several countries (including Botswana, Cape Verde and Zimbabwe and also to a lesser extent Kenya, Nigeria and possibly Ghana). However the region lags far behind other regions in terms of the spectacular changes in reproductive behaviour that have taken place in many of the developing countries in the past twenty years.

Declines in fertility, where they exist, are associated with increases in use of family planning. In each country fertility varies among women in different regions and with different levels of education. Often the fertility of the elementary-educated is highest, indicating the relaxation of customary constraints and traditional sanctions controlling sexual activity. At the same time those who leave primary school have often not gained sufficient autonomy or resources to access effective, modern forms of health care and contraception.

In addition the fall in infant mortality over the same period has been lower than in a number of Asian and Latin American countries. The gains in infant mortality levels have been mainly the result of public health initiatives, including vaccination and oral rehydration. The gains in life expectancy achieved during the same period can largely be attributed to these gains in infant survival.

There are, however, African countries in which it appears that infant mortality has decreased very little or may even have increased. Among the reasons contributing to high levels of infant mortality are high proportions of births in risk-prone categories (too young, too close, too many, too late). This bleak performance of course reflects factors such as urban crises, collapsing public expenditures and diminishing social services - with their negative effect on public health and education; civil wars and ecological disasters. The latter, together with impoverishment, have led to massive migrations and growing numbers of economic and political refugees.

Maternal death risk is a subject for which synthesis of partial information and strong advocacy are leading to development of new primary health care approaches for delivery of services. Following the region-wide attempts to develop Safe Motherhood Initiatives, there has been an upsurge of practical efforts to improve the design and delivery of primary health care programmes.

Studies of abortion are few, with the result that knowledge of the extent, causes and correlates and sequelae of induced abortion is poor. Evidence of its widespread occurrence in medically unsafe conditions and far-reaching negative health consequences is accumulating, as studies such as the multiple national studies supported by the Human Reproduction programme of WHO, as part of the work of the Task Force on Social Science Research on Reproductive Health show.

High rates of maternal deaths, pregnancy wastage and infant and child mortality are recognized as being associated with risky births. Risky births include those that are too closely spaced (less than two years apart, when the mother is not fully recovered from the previous pregnancy and the infant already born is not yet sufficiently mature) and those that occur when the mother is too young for motherhood or too old. In addition births are at risk when the mother has many children and is tired and underweight from overwork, energy depletion and malnourishment.

The most systematically studied aspect of women's roles in the region is numbers of children, patterns of childbearing and adoption of traditional and modern means which prevent, space and stop pregnancies. Teenage childbirth, if not marriage, is widespread with rates higher than in other regions of the world. There is serious erosion of traditional birth spacing mechanisms: exclusive breastfeeding and sexual abstinence.

### **Box 5: Maternal Mortality: A Regional Catastrophe**

*WHO has estimated that the maternal mortality rate for subSaharan Africa is over 600 deaths per 100,000 live births, - by far the highest for any world region. The figures vary from an estimated 1100 per 100,000 in Somalia to 52 per 100,000 in Mauritius.*

*The estimates for the subregions are:*

*Northern Africa 500*

*Western Africa 700*

*Eastern Africa 660*

*Central Africa 690*

*Southern Africa 570*

*Overall 640*

*The high maternal mortality is compounded by the high total fertility rates, with an average of more than 6 live births per woman. In rural areas it is quite common for women to have eight live births and to have been pregnant several more times. If at each pregnancy such a woman has a 1 in 140 chance of dying (calculated for a maternal mortality rate of 700 per 100,000), she has a lifetime risk of pregnancy related mortality of at least 1 in 15.*

The widespread pattern of adolescent childbearing has serious social, economic and demographic effects. It has serious implications for the inequalities suffered by girls and women in educational and vocational training systems and in employment. In addition, it profoundly affects levels of social and economic development in the region as a whole. It is partially a function of parents' poverty. Also, it partially results from the breakdown of traditional sanctions preventing sexual relations. This breakdown has seriously increased the proportion of births which are deemed 'at risk', and affects children's survival and their development.

It is increasingly realized that postponement of the first birth and adequate birth spacing are necessary for the protection and promotion of the reproductive health of adolescent girls and women. Furthermore, due to the fact that traditional mechanisms of birth spacing have eroded, modern methods are required to take their place.

As a consequence of women's changing roles as wives, mothers and workers, there has also been in many countries a rapid erosion of the traditional pattern of long-term, exclusive breastfeeding of infants, with widespread negative impacts on child survival and development. In developed countries, breastfeeding tends to be positively associated with education. Women's education normally reduces breastfeeding behaviour in developing countries. It also reduces post-partum sexual abstinence; this, of course, is also true for developed countries. However, these effects are offset by increased age at marriage and contraceptive use. The effects of education are mediated by socio-cultural settings and therefore will be different from one society to another. A further issue is the way in which maternal education beyond primary level affects healthseeking behaviour and, consequently, child health.

Comparative demographic data, though, do not demonstrate the effects of separation of home and work or mothers' impoverishment, malnutrition and back-breaking workloads (partly caused by male absence and dislocation of economies) on their ability to breastfeed and promote child survival and development.

## **Women's Economic Activities and Resources**

According to ILO estimates only one in ten or so of African adults is in formal sector wage or salaried employment. In addition women are unequally represented in the modern setting of the economy, where they tend to have mainly low-status occupations or low-paid jobs.

Most of the women registered as economically active are found either in agriculture or in low productivity, home-based production and service activities. However, the official documentation of these traditional economic activities is especially poor for women. This has significant repercussions for demo-economic analysis, economic planning and population and development policy-making, all of which try to take women's economic activities into account.

Lack of critical analysis of comparative data on productive and reproductive activities, including homebased and seasonal farm work, makes it difficult, if not impossible, to demonstrate associations between differences and

changes in women's economic activities and resources associated with their occupational, kin, conjugal and domestic roles on the one hand and various demographic and health-related phenomena on the other.

For example small-scale studies show that there may be almost as many reasons to expect women's economic activity to have adverse impacts on child survival and health, as there are reasons for expecting favourable impacts. At the same time a variety of studies have highlighted the significance of delegation and sharing of reproductive and productive tasks between different generations of women, grandmothers, mothers and daughters within domestic groups. Analysis has shown the importance of substitutes for some of these tasks. If patterns of delegation and sharing of infant and child care reduce potential occupational/maternal role conflicts for mothers, then employment-induced constraints to childbearing and rearing are likely to be minimized. A case in point are the teenage mothers who let their infants be taken care of by their mothers.

#### **Box 6: Invisibility and Ignorance Regarding Women's Work**

*A major development in the recent past with regard to information on women's 'work' has been the realization that women's economic activities have remained partially or wholly 'invisible' to the international development specialists and national planners and policy-makers in the region.*

*This is so despite previous decades of evidence to the contrary from ethnographic accounts and several important regional and comparative works, as well as the more recent censal efforts.*

*One of the analytical problems related to data collection at the household level is that women's income-earning activities from cottage-based industries may merge closely into their 'domestic activities'. They may simply be thought of as extensions of their responsibilities and activities as daughters, sisters, mothers and wives. Even their own family members do not perceive them as doing more than 'housework'. Similarly, women farmers' food production may be perceived as simply an extension of their maternal responsibilities for feeding the children and consequently be discounted in economic analysis.*

*Moreover, traditional constraints associated with their familial roles, including control by husbands and high levels of child dependency, may affect women's ability to improve the productivity, profitability and investment levels of their economic activities.*

Women's economic activity and control of resources are generally treated as potentially critical levers for engineering demographic change. A variety of small scale studies, however, show that there are many intervening factors affecting female control of resources and power to make decisions. These include decisions about food allocation and health-seeking behaviour. Moreover, the demographic impacts of these differences are shown to vary in contrasting ethnic groups.

Such enquiries indicate that more needs to be known in different cultural contexts about the precise linkages between women's capacity to produce and control resources and various demographic outcomes. This kind of knowledge is critical for understanding barriers - including husbands' lack of support, prejudice and dominance - affecting access of women and children to health care and other community facilities.

Economic crises have often been the cause of public service retrenchment exercises, jeopardizing the ability of many salary earners to maintain their children in good health. Consequently some women who could previously afford not to work outside the home because their husband's income was sufficient, now have to find jobs. More generally and dramatically, growing numbers of women are being forced into the urban, low-productivity, informal sector of production and provision of services. Women's opportunities for employment may be affected by sexual biases in recruitment. A powerful pressure to take on any work, however dangerous or demanding, is the need to take care of children. The segments of the informal sector where women typically find an occupation often have little growth potential.

In contrast, in rural areas outmigration of males frequently adds burdens. Such trends may increase the value of child labour, thus serving as an even more potent pressure for high fertility. At the same time excessive strains on pregnant and nursing mothers may be raising levels of maternal and infant morbidity and mortality.

Impoverishment and unemployment in urban contexts are associated with increase in the commoditization of sexual services, mainly engaged in by poverty-stricken, migrant women with no other sources of support (husband, kin, occupation) in order to maintain children. The manifold implications of this development for women and their families - including impacts on reproductive health, morbidity and mortality - are beginning to be documented.

# Impacts of Labour Migration

Large scale movements of peoples are being triggered by a variety of situations. These include economic impoverishment; environmental degradation and alterations in the natural resource base; climatic change (including droughts) and population pressure. As a result people are being compelled to migrate in search of often elusive and mainly insecure and poorly paid employment. Migratory flows have increased considerably during the 1980s and 90s, as a consequence of high natural population growth and resulting environmental and economic pressures. International movement has often been facilitated by lack of strict border controls.

labour migrants, female and male, play an important part in the economic development of most countries in the region. International migrants are now estimated to comprise eight percent of the sub-Saharan Africa population as a whole. In some countries the proportion is far higher.

Differential rates of economic growth and income levels over a period of time have resulted in changing in- and outflows of labour migrants, male and female, from and to a particular region. In many cases the social and economic status of migrant workers is especially vulnerable and subject to rude shocks and even aggressive repatriation. Female migration, on the whole a more recent phenomenon, has so far been less well studied than male. Its contexts, implications and impacts clearly vary widely.

The impacts of male migrants' remittances are extremely important to family levels of living in some labour-exporting countries and districts, but consequences of male absence for sexual division of agriculture labour and responsibilities in the family and on child development are likely to be profound.

Evidence of the extent to which women are alone in areas of out-migration, responsible for their own and others' children in their capacities as mother and grandmother, has been accumulating for quite some time. The increase in female-headed households in agricultural areas has significant impacts upon food production and security.

Indeed, the labour migration in its various guises is leading to many different kinds of changes in female and male roles and associated status attributes, with important implications for demographic outcomes. A variety of small studies shows the diversity of such impacts and potential linkages. There is, however, insufficient systematic comparative evidence on many of these issues and of the effect of migration on fertility and mortality.

Among other pathways of influence of labour migration on gender roles are effects upon the age and sex composition of populations and the erosion of kin and community sanctions on familial and sexual behaviour. Both of these types of changes bring people together in new contexts in which both innovation and deviance are possible and observed.

For example, a recent IUSSP collection of studies on sexual behaviour and networking has suggested that increased human mobility and urbanization probably increases the number of sexual partnerships over a lifetime. Also possibly implicated in such changes in this region of the world and others is the rapid and sustained communication of new ideas of what constitutes acceptable patterns of sexual behaviour. At the same time changing socio-economic circumstances, in particular rising levels of impoverishment, insecurity and isolation as well as rising levels of education, add new dimensions. Such considerations are obviously very pertinent to the design of policies and development of programmes to curb the sexual transmission of HIV/AIDS.

In summary, the impact of migration on gender roles, with potential demographic consequences are the following:

- Relaxation of customary constraints and sanctions which mould sexual behaviour and
  - a) protect the young and vulnerable
  - b) link sex to responsible parenthood
  - c) support abstinence during nursing.
- Separation of kin, jeopardizing their solidarity and capacity for mutual support and protection.
- Separation of parents and children, leaving the latter often relatively deprived of care and attention.
- Separation of spouses, endangering conjugal fidelity and consequently reproductive health.
- Increased prevalence of sexually transmitted disease and death.
- Burdening of women with unmanageable loads of productive and reproductive responsibilities, threatening food security and survival.



There is a prize for those left behind if lucky: sharing in migrants' remittances. To what extent, however, is this accompanied by a loosening of conjugal, parental and filial bonds and erosion of remittance flows? To what extent do the remittances make up for the losses sustained: losses in parental care and conjugal cooperation, which often jeopardize the processes of production and reproduction?

## Impoverishment, Inequality and Insecurity

The inequalities and insecurities suffered on a wide scale by women in labour markets and marriage and within their kin groups have profound impacts on their socio-economic status and the burdens of responsibility which they are compelled to shoulder for rearing the next generations. Such inequalities and insecurities have profound consequences for women's abilities to increase the spacing of their births, to provide adequately for the daily and long term needs of their children or to negotiate safer sexual practices with their partners.

A variety of studies have called attention to the limited occupational opportunities, the low status of women, discrimination and occupational hazards. They have accordingly drawn attention to:

- the levels of unemployment faced by job seekers in the formal sector;
- the barriers and constraints faced by women in the informal sectors of economic activity and
- the insecurity, and precarious nature, of much employment.
- the levels of exploitation and harassment endured.

The evidence shows that modern sector employment opportunities are already minimal and will diminish in the future and, as a consequence, 'informal sector' work - that is, microentrepreneurial activities and self-employment (street or homebased) will perforce expand because of the need for survival.

### **Box 7: Sexual Vulnerability: Exploitation, Harassment and Violence**

*Sexual harassment as a workplace hazard endured by many women with potentially serious consequences for reproductive health and demographic outcomes, has so far received comparatively little attention from researchers, policy-makers, lawyers or politicians. But evidence on this topic is beginning to accumulate, as is data on exploitation and violence against women in war zones, in refugee camps and households, and the potential demographic effects of these situations in terms of morbidity and mortality.*

*In a number of countries, evidence related to the escalating AIDS epidemic is prompting women's organizations and others to take up more vociferously the issue of sexual protection of vulnerable females.*

*New data show the greater vulnerability of females and underline the potential extent of this problem, particularly within the contexts of poverty, unemployment and job insecurity. Growing recognition, although slow, of the medical and demographic concerns involved - sexually transmitted morbidity and mortality - means that this agenda will have to be promoted more purposefully.*

*While traditional family farming and marriage institutions have been diminishing as sources of security and support for girls and women, the commoditization of sexual services has been proliferating as an individual source of income and survival for females. In some cities there are thousands of women earning a living by this method and they are often migrants. Sex for money in the context of economic hardship and the breakdown of customary sources of security is becoming an observed, if not accepted, way of survival for increasing numbers of women and their dependent children.*

Moreover, structural adjustment programmes and continuing economic crises are pushing women further into informal, marginal, low-status and low-pay jobs. These include commercial sale of domestic and sexual services. Increasing numbers of women are compelled by poverty to have more than one economic activity or more than one sexual partner.

Women's flexibility, resourcefulness, endurance and survival are frequently being tested to their limits, as they try to support their dependent children in increasingly difficult circumstances. Evidence is mounting that many women workers are the sole providers for their dependents, young and old. Evidence of energy depletion, time pressures and fatigue point to the need for alternative sources of renewable energy other than that derived from their children.

A number of micro studies have documented some of the effects of the economic crisis on women's economic activity. On one hand, the income they obtain from their activities may give them some independence. This may facilitate control of their sexual relations or serve to enhance their marital status. On the other hand, women may be forced to take up an economic activity because of the drop in household incomes and consequent impact on the health of children. Moreover, the majority of employed women are managed by men.

## Child Spacing, Child-Care and Child labour

By now much has been written by population scholars about traditional population balancing mechanisms in the region. These affect fertility and mortality, through constraints, checks and taboos. These in turn have impacts on maternal roles and reproduction. In the early eighties the full importance of traditional child spacing - both breastfeeding patterns and sexual abstinence - became apparent in the demographic literature of the region. Detailed studies of these phenomena show how critically important they are both for child survival and development and for the ability of women to balance reproductive and productive roles.

### Box 8: Women's Work, BreastFeeding and Child Survival

*The ways in which working women cope with infants' feeding needs go largely unrecognized and unanswered in terms of workplace design and supportive policies. The few descriptions of rural cooperative creches and market-based kindergartens demonstrate how the problem could be partially solved.*

*Political will and structural change are required to ensure that the known benefits of breastfeeding can be enjoyed by all infants.*

*Supportive action would comprise appropriate legal and institutional reforms, including ideally, ratification and application of relevant International Labour Standards concerning Maternity Protection, as well as promotion of those institutional supports needed in places of work and elsewhere by Workers with Family Responsibilities.*

Comparisons of national data have demonstrated the cultural differences in the patterns of change in breastfeeding intensity and duration. There is a serious gap, however, regarding the information which would help to explain differences and processes and causes of change and which would help to identify those mothers and children at risk, in terms of truncated or eroded breastfeeding and too-early weaning. This is so because of the already-mentioned lack of data sets on breastfeeding practices and childbearing, which include data on the effects of women's economic activities and location on the timing and duration of breastfeeding practice.

Considerable attention has been focused in the past on the so-called costs and benefits of rearing children and the processes whereby children change from labour assets for their parents into expensive consumers of education and other services. Meanwhile, growing evidence from the region has challenged the conclusion that fertility is simply the result of the economic and social involvement of the biological parents. Not only are non-parental kin often heavily involved, but much child care is by siblings scarcely much older, a factor now affecting many older sisters' schooling.

### Box 9: Child Fostering, Trafficking and Child labour

*As many as 20, 30 or more percent of children may be living with kin and others. Several patterns of arrangements have been identified. These include co-residence with grandparents, inclusion of mothers and their children in larger family households and the transfer of children between kin.*

*Children of poorer mothers with larger numbers of children are more likely to be sent to relatives and non-relatives. Women's propensity to take in children varies partly according to their type of economic activity, their labour demands and their economic standing. Fostered girls often have to do domestic work and look after children.*

*There is evidence from micro studies that attitudes to and practices of fostering, willingness and opportunities to delegate child care may be intimately associated with attitudes and practices relating to family size and family planning.*

*The importance of circulation of children among non-kin as domestic and other forms of labourers has also surfaced as an important phenomenon, especially as charges of abuse and trafficking for illegal purposes have*

*come to the fore in the national press.*

*Trafficking in child labour between impoverished and better-off families serves to support continuation of goals and practices related to high fertility among both rich and poor.*

To ignore the economic and social involvement of others in child-rearing makes nonsense of the exclusive discussion of the role of childbearing and child rearing costs in fertility within the nuclear family. Its neglect also calls into question the logic of attempts to link women's economic activities and fertility levels, since sharing and delegation of child care may diminish any potential conflicts that might be experienced by women engaged simultaneously in productive and reproductive responsibilities. At the same time transfers of children to other families may serve as a form of planning family size.

## **Domestic Contexts of Procreation**

The micro level analysis of the sexual division of labour, resources, power and decision-making in the domestic domain are of growing concern to population scholars. A variety of detailed ethnographic demography illustrates how intergenerational authority patterns within domestic groups can affect women's access to and control over resources and their consequent ability to promote child health. It also shows which factors affect men's decisions regarding paternity - which of their offspring to publicly accept as their own or to maintain and which to reject. Such behaviours are among the processes of domestic decision making and resource allocation, which may vitally affect child development and survival outcomes.

As demographic enquiries have become more sophisticated and culturally sensitive, unitary household models as heuristic tools have perforce been adapted to accommodate recognition of separation, segregation, bargaining, competition, distancing and conflict between spouses and kin within domestic groups. In fact such processes are now themselves major topics for exploration, especially as systems of familial roles and relationships are observed to be undergoing profound transformations and even crises.

Within the complex nexus of domestic behaviour a critical issue is the extent to which female and male household members pool or keep separate the resources they produce and earn, and the proportion they each control and allocate to the promotion of child survival and development.

Adding to our knowledge of household dynamics and women's domestic roles are the studies focusing on single women or female-headed households. The phenomenon is becoming increasingly widespread in this as in other regions of the world, affecting large proportions of women - old and young - and their dependent children. Adult women in their childbearing years are assisted in their dual tasks of production and reproduction by grandmothers and young girls. In some countries the majority of children are raised without much support from the men who fathered them.

In Africa, as in other parts of the world, female-headed households are generally the result of a series of causes beyond the control of women. These include male labour migration, abandonment, separation and death. These processes occur in contexts in which traditional family patterns of female/male cooperation, through inheritance of widows or reintegration of adult daughters in parental or sibling households, are waning. An outcome of these changes is that the majority of the poorest households in a number of countries are female-headed and maintained.

Further policy studies of this phenomenon will be required in view of its profound implications for human development and for the relative share of women and men in the raising of the young.

## **Marriage and Sexual Relationships: transformation and crisis**

Marriage in the region is characterized by the following characteristics: early age of first marriage for females, which has been rising somewhat of late, at least among those with more education; the continuing frequency of polygyny, divorce and remarriage and the escalating phenomenon of unmarried mothers.

Major transformations in marriage practices are also occurring. The speed of changes is reaching crisis proportions in some cases - with continual calls for legal reforms, court cases and battles and escalating rupture of unions - as norms, practices, aspirations and realities no longer match.

Among a few of the educated and employed minority of women, there is the phenomenon of the emergence of women living in unstable unions or preferring the situation 'deuxième bureau' to marriage. This has been shown to be correlated, not only with education but also with rejection of parental and traditional authority. An observed outcome is an increasing number of 'single' women in African cities, who may be neither celibate nor childless, but who certainly lack recognized husbands. The single state, before marriage, may well turn into a 'definitive' status for some women, which is more or less difficult to accept in the long run. Others opt for statuses which enable them to act as though they were married.

The growing proportions of single women not only reflect simply postponement of first marriage, but deeper changes altering the face of urban Africa. A critical outcome is increasing numbers of children born without effective social fathers. Another is the brittle nature of many unions, their short duration and the sexual mobility of individuals, especially in urban areas. This behaviour pattern has accordingly profound implications for child development and reproductive health.

The knowledge that the public health risks of the AIDS epidemic in the region are only likely to be contained if adequate knowledge is developed regarding the modes and contexts of its spread and how to change it, is leading to an increase in studies on sexual behaviour outside, as well as inside, marriage and on the behaviour of women, as well as men, who have short-term or multiple sexual partners.

In particular there has been concern to examine the extent to which women can or do control their own sexual activities and relationships in different situations and the extent to which they are compelled by patriarchy, poverty or powerful sexual seduction to engage in risky behaviour. Evidence has been adduced to support the hypothesis that the greater the imbalance in sexual freedom between men and women, the more rapid the progress of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, through male resort to prostitution.

## **Women's Roles: research issues and some implications for population policies and health programmes**

### **Policy Research Needs**

Systematic, comparative data sets now exist on women's roles and on aspects such as fertility rates, child survival and family planning. We know most about the quantity and tempo of childbearing and the modes adopted to space births. There are other significant areas in which such comparative information is largely lacking.

A number of crucial aspects of women's roles and statuses linked to demographic and health issues still wait to be brought more fully on to the agendas of researchers and policy-makers. These include potential impacts of women's workloads on breastfeeding intensity and duration, ovulation patterns, pregnancy outcomes, birth spacing and infant survival and development; contexts in which conception and abortion occur; correlates and causes of maternal mortality; the nature of kin and partner relations affecting divisions of parental responsibilities; the extent to which women's occupational roles in extra-familial contexts and their impoverishment and family responsibilities are putting them at risk of sexual as well as economic exploitation, with their consequences for reproductive health and survival.

There are still signs of sexual bias in many research designs and approaches. This is witnessed by the fact that we know far more about women's reproductive careers than their productive careers. Conversely, we know little about men's procreative activities and child-rearing behaviour and more about their employment and occupations. Such biases have serious implications for the study of the nature of gender roles and statuses and the kinds of policy advice and programme design which can be based upon it.

Such biases will need to be overcome, if a more gender sensitive and aware analysis of female and male roles in demographic change processes is to be achieved. In particular more attention will have to be focused on male roles in parenting and on the effects of male irresponsibility and 'free-riding' behaviour on female status, fertility and child development outcomes. Significantly comparative analysis of ethnographic facts carried out earlier has indicated that male involvement in the domestic sphere is likely to be a crucial factor affecting female status in the community.

Women's work needs to be better taken into account in population and development policies. To link it more effectively to demographic outcomes such as child survival careful attention will need to be paid to women's time use, time needs, pressures and strains and energy bottlenecks. These considerations also have important implications for rural development and agricultural policies and provision of access to energy sources and labour saving machinery and implements.

Reduction of strain upon the energy and time of female producers would cut down the need for child labour for family survival. Such innovations would allow girls and boys to have more time for learning new skills, and gaining knowledge would prevent children from being the only source of renewable energy available to their mothers, with the consequent pressures for high fertility which this entails.

At the same time modes of organizing production and patterns of control and consumption of resources and products of different types need to be taken more carefully into account. This is so because it is important to make sure that those who have the responsibility for maintaining and raising the next generation have the means to do so. The latter are often female. Yet a frequently witnessed pattern of events is that larger burdens of child-maintenance responsibility fall to females who are the poorest of the poor. This is having serious consequences for female status and for the human development of the next generation.

Critical in this regard are the legal frameworks within which women can or do have access to land and own capital and control labour and the problems they face in their endeavours. If women's access to land and labour is mainly attained through marriage and motherhood, then pressures for high fertility are built-in and will persist.

Sexual coercion, exploitation and harassment in various forms need to be more explicitly recognized and addressed, particularly in terms of the consequences for AIDS prevention. In this regard policies and programmes to protect girls and women and promote equality of opportunity and treatment in places of education, training and employment will be crucial.

There is also need for more explicit knowledge of sexual and marital norms and practices, to better underpin the design and delivery of reproductive health information campaigns and service delivery programmes.

## **Conflict, Strain, Stress and Demographic Outcomes**

Evidence from a wide variety of studies suggests that the knowledge, resources, options and supports available to women in their productive and reproductive tasks and responsibilities greatly affect not only their own levels of stress, coping ability and health status, but also the numbers, health, survival and physical and psychological development of their offspring.

For many women the breakdown of traditional institutions and mechanisms, combined with the comparative lack of access to modern resources and opportunities, is leading to intolerable increases in strains and stresses. This is a result of their heavy combined productive and reproductive responsibilities. Yet the seriousness and dimensions of these strains and responsibilities are apparently not yet sufficiently addressed in policies and programmes.

The cross-national comparative research agenda, however, starkly reveals widespread demographic evidence of the outcomes of these strains. These are the unacceptably high levels of risky births, malnutrition, morbidity, maternal and infant mortality and the widespread inability of mothers, as well as fathers, to balance family resources and family numbers and cope with the needs of offspring.

An additional grave cause for concern and escalating anxiety in many countries is the rapidly rising percentage of sexually transmitted HIV cases. Anxiety regarding its consequences for family and national survival is focusing attention on protection of the girl child, who is especially vulnerable, in view of the evidence on teen pregnancies, HIV status and abortion-related, deaths among teenage girls. As a result, promotion and protection of reproductive health of girls and women as well as of their families is becoming a matter of national emergency in many countries.

## **Some Policy Options**

Several of the gender issues highlighted in this monograph are necessarily at the core of population and development policy and programme formulation. They are among the key elements necessary to achieve economic and demographic goals, including health and human development.

What, then, are some of the policy and programme issues to be addressed by African Governments during the rest of the decade with regard to women's roles and gender issues in relation to the economic and demographic crises pervasive in the region?

Unfortunately, provision of higher education and formal sector job opportunities for the majority of women are not feasible options open to most African governments wishing to lower rates of infant mortality and fertility, much as they might like to make such choices.

Until the time these become realizable goals, other avenues to demographic innovation will need to be explored. These will include promotion of access to land, water, renewable energy sources, agricultural knowledge and inputs and mechanized rural development strategies, which obviate the need for child labour.

#### **Box 10: Female/Male Access to Education**

*Almost all countries in sub-Saharan Africa record disparities between girls and boys in access to education. Even the countries with a good record in this regard would have to make a concerted effort to bridge the gap, especially with regard to vocational, technical and higher education.*

*For example, Ghana would apparently need to spend \$53 million to close the education gender gap. This shows enrolment of girls at secondary school to be 31 per cent of the overall population for students. In Nigeria the gap is even greater and would require expenditure of nearly \$113 million to bridge.*

*An important issue is not only to enrol girls in primary school but to see that they remain in school. Many become school drop-outs as a result of pregnancy and domestic labour demands.*

*Another concern in the 1980s and 1990s has been the levelling out and even the fall of school enrolment rates. Behind this situation, there are valid economic and social considerations from the parents: increased costs of education, its deteriorating quality, very poor employment prospects, falling wages and shrinking wage scales. This unfortunately does not take into account societal and long-term benefits of sending children to school. This situation may further delay any expected African fertility transition linked to girls' education.*

## **Access to Health Care and Family Planning**

An important condition for promoting and protecting reproductive health and survival of women and their children, as well as for facilitating the demographic transition, is provision of primary health care and family planning services. Accessibility to such services is crucial to their widespread use. However, provision of modern forms of health care has been dwindling in many countries in the past decade in the face of populations doubling over twenty years and savage cutbacks in health budgets.

Important factors which hinder the adoption of modern contraceptive methods are lack of Family Planning staff trained to cope with peoples' needs for information, advice and counselling.

Another hurdle to be overcome is the need for programmes to take account of culturally and socially diverse local needs and conditions. This has not, however, prevented the apportioning of blame to women, as if the lack of adoption of modern methods of birth control is their fault.

In reality for the majority, especially in rural areas, services and commodities are unavailable, despite the improvements which have been made in the past decade.

#### **Box 11: Family Planning: Related Attitudes and Behaviour**

*Among the findings of studies on family planning are the lack of access to high quality services, the prevalence of method side effects, poor compliance and method failure, and opposition from family members and peers. These are all influential factors, as they are in other parts of the world.*

*Also, even if the official position of many African governments in regard to population growth and family planning has changed, commitment may, in practice, still be somewhat tepid.*

## **Empowerment and Mobilization of Women's Groups**

The available evidence points to the need to empower women as well as men to gain access to needed resources, to make informed choices and to take effective action with respect to their reproductive and productive lives. Without such empowerment the innovations needed to lower rates of malnutrition, morbidity and mortality, to promote child survival and development are not likely to occur.

There is evidence of the ability and efficacy of women's groups in adopting and adapting innovations which have the potential to profoundly affect economic and demographic outcomes. In a number of instances in different countries in the region women in rural and traditional areas - where fatalism and pronatalism persist - have been adopting new practices, thus showing the pervasiveness of latent demand for changes which will promote family wellbeing and survival. Indeed, in many cases questions have been posed as to whether existing services are meeting women's needs and what the dimensions of such unmet needs are.

The changes wanted and needed are those which will help them to improve their agricultural practices, cut down their domestic workloads, improve the productivity of cottage-based industries and help them plan, postpone and space births, so that they can combine promotion of child survival and development with work schedules.

Many examples demonstrate that even in very traditional rural societies there are latent demands for family planning. A major problem is to ensure that the demand for contraception aroused by information, education and communication activities can be satisfied by the services locally available.

Policies of African governments toward family planning have progressively evolved over the past three decades. programmes have now been developed in most countries which support family planning and, in some cases, family life education for schoolchildren. There has, however, been a minimal adoption of modern contraceptive methods by most African populations. Effective access still eludes the majority of women and their sexual partners in sub-Saharan Africa.

## **Protection of the Girl Child**

Among the realistically attainable policies and programmes which will need to be put into place to attain goals for promotion of survival, lower mortality and fertility and enhanced human development, are the economic, social and legal support and protection of young girls. If it is not put in place the reproductive health and survival of whole generations is seriously at risk.

## ***Seminar on Women and Demographic Change in Sub-saharan Africa***

List of the papers presented at the Seminar on 'Women and Demographic Change in Sub-Saharan Africa' organized by the IUSSP Scientific Committee on Gender and Population, and ORSTOM - Dakar, held in Dakar, Senegal, from 3 to 6 March 1993.

### **Session 1: The Status of Women in Sub-Saharan Africa: Overview**

- 'What do we know? Conceptual and methodological issues in sub-Saharan Africa' by Christine Oppong
- 'Women's resource control and demand for children in Africa' by Mary Kritz and Paulina Makinwa-Adebusoye
- 'Women's status in the demographic literature on sub-Saharan Africa' by Etienne and Francine van de Walle

### **Session 2: Nuptiality and Family Structure**

- 'Les naissances et conceptions pré-nuptiales en milieu rural au Sénégal' by Valérie Delaunay et Thérèse Locoh
- 'Plurinuptialité et relations de genre en Afrique de l'Ouest: le cas du Togo' by Thérèse Locoh and Marie-Paule Thiriat
- 'The changing dynamics of family formation: women's status and nuptiality in Togo' by Anastasia Gage-Brandon and Dominique Meekers
- 'Cheminevements matrimoniaux et place de la femme dans le phénomène des enfants de la rue au Congo' by Jean-Paul Toto
- 'Do marital partners have different reproductive preferences in sub-Saharan Africa?' by Akinrinola Bankole and Oyewole Olaleye

### **Session 3: Fertility**

- 'Autonomy versus dependence: understanding women's status in sub-Saharan Africa' by Alex Chika Ezeh
- 'High fertility and the intergenerational transmission of gender inequality: children's transition to adulthood in Ghana' by Cynthia Lloyd and Anastasia Gage-Brandon
- 'The relationship between women's status, proximate determinants and fertility in Nigeria' by Christiana Okojie
- 'Socio-cultural context of high fertility among the Igbo of Nigeria' by Uche Isiugo-Abanihe

### **Session 4: Health and Mortality**

- 'Statut des femmes et comportements de santé en Côte d'Ivoire' by Sylvie Delcroix and Agnès Guillaume
- 'Conjoncture économique et risques liés à la maternité: le cas du Zaïre' by Ngondo a Pitshandenge I.
- 'The status of women and maternal health in rural Nigeria' by Joseph Ottong
- 'Intra-household female status differentials in rural Mali. Variations in maternal resources for children's illness management and day-to-day care' by Sarah Castle
- 'Maternal education and infant/child morbidity in Ghana: the case of diarrhea. Evidence from the Ghana demographic and health survey' by Eva Tagoe

### **Session 5: Sexually Transmitted Diseases**

- 'Women's vulnerability to STD/HIV in sub-Saharan Africa: an increasing evidence' by Michel Caraël
- 'Women and AIDS in Ghana: "I control my body" (or do I?)' by Akosua Adomako
- 'La femme et le SIDA au Burundi' by Khadiyatou Mbaye
- 'Women's control over their sexuality: implications for STDs and HIV/AIDS transmission in Nigeria' by I.O. Orubuloye



## **Session 6: Economic Activity**

- 'Les déterminants familiaux de l'activité professionnelle des femmes de Dakar, Sénégal' by Philippe Bocquier and Jeanne Nanitelamio
- 'Marriage, family structure and women's economic opportunities in coastal Tanzania' by Matthew Lockwood
- 'Place de la femme dans une économie informelle: le cas du Zaïre' by Marie-Claire Lepina Mwabiére
- 'The economic activities and status of rural Muslim Hausa women in Northern Nigeria' by Elsbeth Robson

## **Session 7: Migration**

- 'Migration and women's status in sub-Saharan Africa' by Paulina Makinwa-Adebusoye and A.A. Afolayan
- 'Sudanese displaced women and economic activities' by Samira Amin Ahmed
- 'Interactions between household structures and female migration in rural Mali' by Sally Findley and Assitan Diallo
- 'Women migrants and hometown linkages in Nigeria: status, economic roles and contributions to community development' by Lillian Trager

## **Session 8: Natural Resources and the Environment**

- 'Women, natural resources and the environment' by Hyacinth Ajaegbu
- 'Women, population growth and commercialization of fuelwood in Northern Ghana' by Elizabeth Ardayio-Schandorf
- 'The effects of male migration on women's management of the natural resource base. The case study of Passoré (Burkina Faso)' by Roz David

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