DEBATES

Family Division of Labour and the Economic Status of Women in the Process of Industrialization Historical Experience and Present Situation in the Third World

Marianne Assenmacher
University of Paderborn/FRG

1. Introduction

In the light of history the so-called 'natural' or 'traditional' labour division with sex-specific norms and roles can be seen as the result of changing economic conditions affecting the economic functions and demographic structure of the family. Industrialization, implying a high degree of specialization and a corresponding shift from subsistence to market production, has had a strong impact on the extent and character of family division of labour which constitutes the basis of the economic status of women. This status is basically affected by both their economic role in society and their role in the family. Development processes which can be summarized under the term of 'modernization' have the habit of repeating themselves. The recurrence of the events connected with them changes, sometimes, according to period and region but can be interpreted as the same basic trends which are modified by socio-cultural factors especially religion. These main trends in economic-demographic development first of all mark a functional change in the family from production and consumption unit to a mere production unit. Furthermore this implies a change in demographic patterns concerning nuptiality and fertility. Alterations in marriage and reproductive patterns can therefore be seen as a response to economic development. These facts affect the role of women, who are in charge of household and child-care responsibilities, much more than the role of men.

A further link can be drawn from economic and demographic structures regarding the engagement of women in market and non market-economic ac-

tivities. The proportion between market and non-market production is, on a national level, determined by the stage of secular economic development, i.e. by the share of market-orientated products, which are traded in terms of money. but it has to be pointed out that the demand for female labour during the process of industrialization fluctuates in its different phases. In the first phase, labour intensive production leads to higher employment of women, as does the present trend towards the extension of the service sector. E. Boserup has shown that in the second phase which involves a higher degree of mechanization, the employment of women decreases (Boserup, 1970). Closely connected with economic development is a specific system of values for economic activities. In a society where most products are market-goods, paid labour is held in higher esteem than non-market work. Thus persons earning money hold a higher economic status than those only carrying out domestic work. Therefore the economic status of women, their options and dependence, have to be observed in a specific economic-demographic context.

When illustrating these relationships in the following chapter I will analyze from an historical point of view women's economic role in the family in Germany. The subsequent part of the paper tries to show, in a historical comparison, similarities and differences in the role of women in Western Europe and their situation in developing countries. The question will be posed as to whether we can learn from history to draw some political conclusions so as to raise the status of women as an end in itself and, from a pragmatic stance, to influence the demographic situation.

2. Family and economic production in preindustrial Germany.

The basic economic unit of premodern feudal societies in rural German areas was the peasant family farm. Besides that, we find the skilled manual worker family in the towns strongly organized by guilds. The function of both family types as the unit of production and consumption can be shown by their marriage behaviour patterns and the number of children. Differences in family size between rural and urban families are to be seen as a result of different modes of production. In this sense marriage was mainly an economic matter. Legal restrictions which existed until about the mid-XIXth century in most German states only allowed marriage when the couple had an economic subsistence basis. These rules had a regulative effect on population development. The effect was that the average marrying age was relatively high and about 40% of the adult population even lived as singles (Rosenbaum, 1982, p. 70, p. 148). The main factors for the choice of a wife were the ability to work and her health. After marriage the wife acted as the focal point of the house. Household, child care, work in the garden, small-scale animal breeding, dairy farming, production of clothes were her areas of work, whereas her husband worked as a farmer in the fields or as a craftsman in his workshop. While the farm wife had to help in the fields if necessary,

e.g. during harvesting time, the wife of the craftsman was not able to help her husband because mostly skills were needed, which women could not acquire. Since the XVth/XVIth century they had not been allowed by the guilds to get a formal qualification.[1] The number of children in the household of a craftsman's family was much lower than in the peasant family. Children's economic roles differed in relation to their capacity to work (Rosenbaum, 1982, p. 91ff.). In the peasant family the children constituted human labour and heirs. The role of children in the handicraft family was less important as human labour for the same reason given above, that specific qualifications were needed. The status of women in both family types was defined by their economic role. In the peasant family they were held in relatively high esteem as wife and mother. Men and women had their own separate independent areas of work which were complementary to each other. The subsistence economy depended on the work of both sexes and therefore the contribution of each was acknowleged. Although women had fewer official legal and political rights than those of men, women's status in the family was often very high.

From the second half of the XVIIIth century onward market orientated production, which was formerly seen more or less as a by-product of subsistence production, increased rapidily. An increasing population ran parallel with a growing demand for trade goods especially textile products during the mercantile period (Marschalck, 1984). The peasant population could take up traditional sideline activities. Because they were not subjected to the strong rules of the town guilds they constituted a large, cheap and flexible potential of human labour force. A guaranteed minimum wage did not exist nor was there a ban on women's and children's work. The advantages of the location 'countryside' were even increased by lower costs of raw-materials and tax payments (Kriedte et.al., 1978, p. 57ff.). All these factors led to the expansion of a decentralized cottage industry, i.e. of small-scale production at home under the control of a salesman or merchant. Cottage industry flourished in Germany between 1835 and 1850. In those years the share of homeworkers amounted up to about 10% of all employees. This global number does not show the great importance of cottage industry in some regions, where most of the population earned their living by this mode of production (Marschalck, 1984, p. 29). Here, agricultural production was almost entirely replaced by cottage-industry. These were mostly regions where there had been small agricultural holdings on poor soils e.g. in middle highlands areas like Thuringia, Saxony, Silesia, Wurtemberg and the hilly area around Wuppertal (Bergisches land). These were densely populated regions where landed property was split into small units, which hampered a more intensive use of ground. Cottage industry in these areas formed the basis for later industrialization. In economic history such a process is referred as proto-

[1] Before that time in the early middle ages we can find women in a lot of guilds and there were even all-women guilds. (ENNEN, 1984).

industrialization, the first phase of industrialization (Mager, 1988). Because of the high dependence of home-workers on the distributor and the cyclical fluctuations in demand, there was great economic insecurity. The work of women and children was an absolutely necessary contribution to the subsistence of the family. Their dependence on the family-wage economy for a livelihood had a strong impact on the organization of work in the family (Tilly / Scott, 1978). Division of labour between the sexes often changed in relation to cyclical and structural conditions. Home became the common production place for man, wife and children. The usual rigid separation of the different areas of work was dissolved and this led to a more flexible division of labour; sometimes traditional role responsibilities were even reversed. This internal flexibility can be regarded as a strategy for survival. Male lace-makers or male spinners were usually as skilful as female smiths (Rosenbaum, 1982, p. 230) and often housework was done by men (Kriedte et. al., 1978, p. 135).

These changing relationships within the family work-unit influenced attitudes towards marriage and children. Because of lesser dependence on land ownership for the economic existence of the family there was a lower marrying age and a higher number of children than among the population living in mere agricultural areas (Rosenbaum, 1982, p. 216). In the protoindustrial household children were primarily regarded as human labour and as security for old age (Kriedte et. al., 1978, p. 167). Fertility, production and consumption formed a cyclical family dilemma. At the birth of children the parents became poor because the children were only consumers. As they grew up they were able to contribute to home-craft production and to family income. When they left their parents and started a family of their own they entered into competition with their parents (Kriedte et. al., 1978, p. 126ff.). Because they were dependent on a distributor and on the economic situation, only few proto-industrial families suceeded in reaching some prosperity.

After 1850 the industrialization process in Germany intensified nationwide. With the expansion of factories, men and women were faced with a completely new situation as to working conditions. One striking aspect was the separation of living and working place. Domestic work and child-rearing had to be reorganized and coordinated in relation to the new mode of production. The bourgeois family became a model with its strict separation of the professional male from the female's domestic family sphere. The family changed from a production and consumption unit to a mere consumption unit (Tilly / Scott, 1978). Domesticity and motherliness of the woman became her mode of being. In contrast to former times this was no longer interpreted as her working field but as a characteristic feature of femininity. Wage labour primarily became men's labour. This led to a situation where women and children were given only a kind of reserve function on the labour market. Female wage labour was socially only accepted as a temporary activity if it was an economic necessity for the family or correspondingly for the national economy.

Industrialization in Germany was based on heavy and chemical industries whereas, in contrast, it was the textile industry that led the way to economic progress in Britain. The new industries in Germany preferred male employees. In the second half of the last century a global process began by which family labour lost its former importance. This happened even in the manufacturing industries as home-industrial production shifted towards factory production. Such a process contributed to the decreasing significance of female labour and women's economic contribution in the years of rapid factory expansion in Germany during the second half of the last century. Not before the XXth century were the so-called 'traditional' female industries established. These are characterized as low-wage, consumer-good branches with declining growth possibilities (Willms-Herget, 1985, p. 124ff.).

Therefore women became more and more economically dependent on their husbands. This holds true especially for women living in towns. Industrialization had triggered off a steady migration of the peasant population to the towns as the centres of industrial production. Here women hardly found jobs. Only a small number of young unmarried women were employed in the textile industries as low-paid unskilled workers. The greater part of the female urban population had to take up other, service-orientated activities like domestic service or home-craft. Thus, low-paid service activities became the main field of employment for young unmarried women, who were often able to use their experiences from their former work as maids on the farms. If married women needed to contribute to family income there was only the possibility of home-based work, especially for the clothing trade. Here they could make use of their abilities in a similar way. Home-based work became female work in this period. For women who migrated from the countryside into town, gainful employment was a natural contribution to family income (Rosenbaum, 1982, p. 406). This influenced their attitude towards payment. The family continued to be the basic economic unit and payment was not seen as a reward for woman's individual work but as an additional family income. This meant that the husband was regarded as the main breadwinner of the family and his wage labour was highly respected.

These developments led to the identification of work with paid professional work. This implies that one's self-esteem is obtained from the measurable monetary contribution to the income of the family and society. The understanding of modern industrial society as a labour-orientated society is founded on this fact. Social status and individual personal structures are mainly deduced from one's occupation (Stork, 1983). This implies a complementary but inferior position for domestic work and child-care and correspondingly for the person who do this kind of work, which means for women.

From this point of view the childless woman with today's strong occupational orientation gives the logical response to her commercialised environment identifiable by its labour-and income-orientated order of values and norms.

3. Historical experience and current situation in third world countries.

The preceding historical reflections can be summarized as follows:

(1) The division of labour in German families has adjusted to changing modes of economic production. An economic definition of family division of labour has proved true.

(2) In pre-industrial times women's labour was held in relatively high esteem because of her importance in the family and the mutual economic dependence of man and woman due to complementary work fields.

(3) In the wake of industrialization women became more and more dependent on their husbands. The sex-specific division of labour in the family has come to be an institutional factor within the market-orientated economy. This has been sanctioned by a lack of legal political rights.

Women's work in the family has been socially degraded because of the dominance of wage labour within the money economy.

(4) A further feature of the early industrialization process was a relative decrease in the participation of women in the formal labour market which lasted until the first World War. Men were recruited for modern jobs, while women stayed in traditional activities. This was due to cyclical and structural economic conditions. Women found work areas only in more informal, unskilled low-paid work. Here, women's internalization of existing norms for centuries met economic interests.

Despite the fact that a simple application of these conclusions to the situation of women in Third World countries today would implicate denying their specific social-cultural context, these historical observations allow us to observe some remarkable similarities.

(1) The adjustment of family division of labour according to a changing mode of production can be observed world-wide in all history. E. Boserup has described the conditions of 'female' or 'male' farming systems in pre-colonial Africa (Boserup, 1970). There are other anthropological studies which analyze the demographic implications of these different farming systems. An interesting aspect, for example, is the strong relationship between monogamy and polygamy and male and female farming, which Goody discovered. This can be explained economically too (Goody, 1973).

These processes and patterns are not limited to a special area. This is shown by other reports like those which describe kinds of sex-specific division of labour in Latin American communities and their implications for demographic behaviour and female social status (Lenz, 1984; Frieben, 1984).

(2) There is no doubt about the high and relatively independent economic status of women in the family in mere agricultural subsistence societies. Best known are the female farmers in Africa. They were responsible for the family and had the right to trade surpluses on their own account (Hay, Sticher, 1984). Another well-known example are the Yoruba women of West-Africa

who filled a most important role there as small petty traders (Sudarska, 1973). The necessity of both male and female work for breeding, clothing and living becomes visible in time studies for particular communities (Dixon-Mueller, 1985).

(3) Steps towards industrialization in developing societies implying the establishment of a market sector besides the subsistence sector show in several regions a much stronger loss of women's economic autonomy and independence than in Western Europe. The period of colonization in Africa that had brought profound changes in the distribution of property had often led to a loss of the economic subsistence basis of female farmers. This had resulted in a greater work burden for women who continued to be the breadwinners of the family. The same facts hold for the trade-women mentioned above who had to enter into competition with a modern trade sector. Similar tendencies can be observed with the introduction of new technologies. Without questioning the necessity of technological improvements, there are many examples which show that women's work in particular was strongly affected by technological changes (Ahmed, 1983).[2] At the same time women were faced with a lower appraisal of their work because of the high esteem of wage labour equated with male labour (Youssef, 1982). It is not surprising that attempts have often been made to compensate for the degradation of women's economic role and status in the family along with great economic insecurity by enhancing their status through high fertility.

(4) In contrast to the decrease in female factory work in Germany during the first rapid industrialization phase nowadays we can observe a high proportion of female workers in factories in export-orientated states. Countries like the Philippines, Taiwan or Korea have established export-promoting zones to boost economic growth. This mainly concerns the manufacturing sector, especially the textile and electronic industries. The structural composition of the leading economic sectors explains the contrast with German development, where more capital-intensive sectors had been dominant. The economic success of the South-East Asian countries is primarily built upon the work of young unmarried women. They meet the high demand of labour-intensive industries for unqualified but skilful and cheap labour. The integration of these women in the modern production process does not result in greater autonomy from the family or a higher educational level. Gaining a greater independence is still hampered by existing social restrictions, which are often justified religiously (Greenhalgh, 1985). This is the same process as the attitude described above, according to which women's wages are regarded as an additional family income. Here again, traditional rules and values concede women an important role in economic development, but still a limited one with regard to better jobs.

[2] Ahmed gives many examples in his description of the consequences of technology on women's work in developing countries. (Ahmed, 1983).

In Sub-Saharan Africa married and unmarried women hardly find jobs in modern urban industries. The high proportion of women in the informal urban economy shows trends similar to those in Germany at the turn of the century. The utilization of already available abilities from the basis of women's activities in towns: home craft, petty trade and street trading are the main areas of work of African urban women (Donner-Reichle, 1984). In the past, in the subsistence economy, these activities provided a basis for economic independence. This is no longer the case for urban women living and working within a more market-orientated economy. They do not have any other options and it has proved to be hardly enough as a basis for living.

In Latin American countries like Argentina and Brazil, women were forced out of the modern industrial sector at the beginning of the century; until then they had contributed considerably to production (Klemp, 1984; Rott, 1984). They were mostly replaced by male immigrant workers. Women had no choice but to shift their activities to the more informal labour market. Despite a low average female participation rate in Latin America this development has resulted in an extremely high level of employment of girls and women as domestic servants. Only later can a trend to jobs in the modern service sector, for example to clerical occupations, be observed.

4. Conclusion

The tendencies described above are meant as a supplementation to studies of regional patterns of industrialization processes. The aim of these remarks has been to outline some fundamental tendencies in economic development and their impact on the status of women in family and society. The main conclusion is that women and work as well as women and demographic behaviour have to be regarded within the system of cultural norms and values. But those norms and values are influenced — though not exclusively — by the level of economic development. Because of the strong persistence of existing values in a period of transition there can often be found a transitory divergency between individual behaviour and public interest.

Bibliography

AHMED I., (1983): Technology and Rural Women in the Third World. International Labour Review. Vol. 122, No. 4.

ANKER R.- HEIN C., (1985): Why Third World urban employers usually prefer men. International Labour Review. Vol. 124, No. 3.

ASSENMACHER M., (1988): Frauenarbeit in Schwarzafrica Ökonomisch-demographische Aspekte. in: Heilig F., Otto J., (Hrsg.) Entwicklung in Afrika? Bevölkerung, Ernährung, Wirtschaft. Wiesbaden.

BOSERUP E., (1970): Women's Role in Economic Development, London.

BOSERUP E., (1975): The traditional Division of Work between the Sexes, a Source of Inequality. Research Symposium in Women and Decision Making: A Social Policy Priority. Geneva.

DIXON-MUELLER R., (1985): Women's work in Third World agriculture. Concepts and Indicators. International Labour Office. Women, Work and Development, 9, Geneva.

DONNER-REICHLE C., (1984): Migration und städtischer Arbeitsmark für Frauen in Tanzania. Ausbruch aus dem Patriarchat. in: Lenz I., Rott R., (eds) (1984). Saarbrücken.

FRIEBEN E., (1984): Von der 'Herrin der fruchtbaren Gärten' zur Hausfrau: indianische Frauen und Entwicklung in Amazonien. in: Lenz I., Rott R., (eds) (1984). Saarbrücken.

GERHARD U., (1978): Verhälnisse und Verhinderungen. Frauenarbeit, Familie und Rechte der Frauen im 19. Jhd., Frankfurt.

GOODY J., (1973): The Character of Kinship. Cambridge.

GREENHALGH S., (1985): Sexual Stratification: The other Side of "Growth with Equity" in East Asia. Population and Development Review. Vol. 11, No. 2.

HAY M.J. - STRICHTER S., (1984): African Women South of the Sahara. London, New York.

KLEMP L., (1984): Die Entfaltung des Land-Stadt-Gegensatzen in Argentinien als formbestimmendes Element der Veränderung weiblicher Arbeitsverhältnisse. in: Lenz I., Rott R., (eds) (1984). Saarbrücken.

KRIEDTE P. - MEDICK H. - SCHULUMBOHM J., (1978): Industrialisierung vor der Industrialisierung. Göttingen.

LENZ I., (1984): Geschlechtliche Arbeitsteilung und Subsistenzproduktion: Eine einführende Diskussion. in: Lenz I., Rott R., (1984). Saarbrücken.

LENZ I. - ROTT R., (eds) (1984): Frauenarbeit im Entwicklungsprozeß. Saarbrücken.

MAGER W., (1988): Protoindustrialisierung und Protoindustrie. Forthcoming.

MARSCHALCK P., (1984): Bevölkerungsgeschichte Deutschlands im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert. Frankfurt.

MÜLLER W. - WILLMS A. - HANDL J., (1983): Strukturwandel der Frauenarbeit 1880-1980. Frankfurt-New York.

ROSENBAUM H., (1982): Formen der Familie. Frankfurt / M.

SHIELDS N., (1986): Women in the Urban labor Markets of Africa. The case of Tanzania: World Bank Staff Working Paper No. 380.

STORK W., (1983): Die Wirtschaftspolitik der Wachstumskritiker. Frankfurt a.M.

SUDARKASA N., (1973) A Study of Women at Work: A study of yoruba Women in the Marketplace and in the Home. Ann Arbor, Mich.

TILLY A.L. - SCOTT J.W., (1978): Women, Work and Family. New York, Chicago, San Francisco.

WILLMS - HERGET A., (1985): Frauenarbeit. Zur Integration der Frauen in den Arbeitsmarkt. Frankfurt / M, New York.

WOLF - GRAFF A., (182): Frauenarbeit im Abseits. München.

YOUSSEF N.H., (1983): The Interrelationship between the Division of Labour in the Household, Women's Roles and their Impact on fertility. In: Anker R.,; Buvinic M.; Youssef, N.H.; Women's Roles and Population Trends in the Third World. London / Canberra.