

**Gender and Development Theories:  
from Invisible Women to  
Missing Women**

Draft for International Workshop

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National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka, Japan

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Laurel Bossen

Visiting Professor

National Museum of Ethnology

And

Associate Professor

Department of Anthropology

McGill University

Montreal, QC, Canada H3A 2T7

## **Gender, Development, and the Division of Labor**

1. Thirty five years ago, Ester Boserup pointed out that economic development could be harmful to women if it excluded them.
2. Exclusion or marginalization of women from economic development could also retard the overall process of economic development and the benefits it can confer on society as a whole.

Boserup's global perspective and theory have generated a great deal of research and led to many refinements but the broad outlines of her theory are still a useful starting point.

- In developing countries, women contribute enormous amounts of labor to farming in many parts of the world yet governments rarely count them, and development policies rarely credit them or invest in them.
- Women's rights to use and own property are rarely formally recognized and supported by formal laws or development agencies.
- Women's roles in trade and commerce are often overlooked, and access to credit denied when they lack property titles.
- Regions with high female contributions to farming tend to high female contributions to trade and more egalitarian gender relations.
- Regions with low female participation in farming generally practice plow farming with draft animals, tend to have very non-egalitarian gender relations, greater female seclusion within the home, and a greater emphasis on women's reproductive role as the basis of female value and status.
- Regions with female farming traditions or high female participation in farming included: sub-Saharan Africa, parts of Latin America with indigenous farming hoe-farming systems (and formerly North America), much of Southeast Asia.
- Colonial and development transformations have often imposed employment patterns based on the model of males farming and females tied to the home.

These represent just a few of the many provocative theories that Boserup advanced with the support of statistical and ethnographic studies organized to demonstrate macro-economic patterns around the world.

In the 1970s and 1980s, many anthropologists sought to test these theories as gender and development studies burgeoned. I will show that different macroregions face different kinds of gender and development challenges. I will first give some examples from my own work in Guatemala which shares similarities to other Latin American regions.

## Gender and development in Guatemala: four sites compared

I examined four different communities in order to understand the impact of various types of changes on the economic participation and social condition of women. I was particularly interested in women's access to labor, employment, and cash income from the market economy, as well as their access to land and housing. Overall, I found that Boserup's theories were supported by my research.

- In the indigenous Maya farming community of small landowners where women played a role in farming, migrant labor, and marketing, gender relations were more egalitarian as measured by intra-family relations. Women could own property, and inherit houses.
- In a Ladino (Spanish-speaking) sugar plantation community where the land and sugar mill were privately owned, and where males monopolized formal employment, women did little work for pay, and gender relations were very unequal.
  - The restriction of formal employment to males was paired with greater violence and more unequal uses of income.
  - Women had to ask their husband's permission to go to town, and beatings were common.
  - Women had very weak property rights, for family housing depended on the plantation where the husband held the job.

As rapid urbanization was also an aspect of development that Boserup studied, I also examined gender relations of urban residents, many of them migrants to the city, in two different economic sectors: squatter housing, and a middle-class suburb where the housing was legally titled.

- In the squatter settlement, a high proportion of women were economically active in the informal sector. They were also a high proportion of the "owners" of housing that they erected illegally on unoccupied land. Their income and their informally recognized squatter-rights within the community gave them a relatively strong bargaining position despite an urban culture of male superiority.
- In the urban community based on formal employment, much of it in government and private corporate sector, women had low access to jobs and were expected to stay home and raise children. Despite greater prosperity, gender relations were highly inegalitarian. Women's influence over family income, property, and the right to work were weak.

Overall, the findings were consistent with Boserup's theories that the indigenous farming community with high female economic participation would be more egalitarian, and that female employment outside the home led to more equal gender relations.

While Guatemala had a patriarchal family tradition, certain factors made it somewhat different from patterns we find in Asia.

- Guatemala also had a certain degree of regional mobility because it was a market economy. Although women found few formal opportunities in the plantation sector, they could migrate to the cities where they could find informal jobs and housing.
- Guatemalan subcultures may be considered patriarchal, but not to the degree found in some Asian patriarchal cultures for two reasons.
  - In indigenous communities, village endogamy was normal. This meant that women generally had supportive kin nearby.
  - In the European cultural tradition transmitted through Spanish colonialism, kinship was bilateral. A woman's family continued to be concerned with her after her marriage.

Both of these patterns encourage women's families to invest in them.

The overall population distribution in Guatemala fit the patterns Boserup described: The small farming sector had an equal sex ratio, the plantation belt had a male surplus, and the capital city had a female surplus.

### **Sex ratios**

While Boserup drew attention to regional sex imbalances such as the "female cities" of Latin America, and the "male towns" of Africa, it was anthropologist Barbara Miller who really opened up the study of unequal sex ratios as evidence of unnatural female mortality.

Abnormal sex ratios have become a very important domain in gender and development studies in the 1990s and the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and the subject of many theories.

### **Gender and Development in India**

Barbara Miller's *The Endangered Sex*, was a study of female neglect in India.

As an anthropologist, Miller took a bold step in using statistical data to compare sex ratios (here defined as the number of males per hundred females) and show how it related to gender discrimination. She found an unnatural shortage of females in India.

- She argued that this was not due to migration because it started at birth and continued through childhood.

- She concluded that strong son preference and differential treatment of sons and daughters brought about female infanticide and excess female mortality – that is, mortality that is higher than it would be if both sexes were treated equally.

Miller also used geographic and ethnographic data to study the regional distribution of these imbalances. She discovered marked differences between the proportions of males and females in northwest and southern India.

- In northern region of India sex ratios were much high than normal from the preceding century to the present. The historic practice of female infanticide had not disappeared. It was still practiced, and daughters generally suffered higher malnutrition and mortality in childhood than boys, leading to a disproportionate number of males in the population.
- In the southern states of India, fatal discrimination against daughters was much less evident. Birth and child sex ratios were closer to the expected ratio of around 106 boys per 100 girls.

In Miller's theory, as in Boserup's, the participation of women in economic activities outside the home was a major explanation for the different value placed on girls and women in these two contrasting regions of India.

Miller considered the general differences in agriculture as a possible foundation for some of the difference.

- In northern India where wheat was grown and plow agriculture was practiced there was little need for female farm labor
  - women made few obvious contributions to food production
  - women were confined to the home, often in purdah, and were seen to have little value beyond reproduction (despite the large amounts of domestic labor they contributed, an observation Boserup had made)
  - families practiced hypergyny (women marrying into higher status families, with dowry)
- In southern areas of India, where intensive irrigated rice farming required much more hand labor
  - women made publicly recognized contributions to farming (and as Boserup observed, in the hilly tribal areas women contributed labor to farming.)
  - their families did not practice purdah (household seclusion of women to avoid contact with strangers) and

- daughters were married to equals, with little dowry, and did not marry very far away from their natal families.

Since Miller's work, many economists and anthropologists studying development have examined the significance of unequal sex ratios, as a sign of development failure.

Moreover, the United Nations Development Reports and economists such as Amartya Sen have diverted the emphasis in development from strictly economic measurements to measures of the health, education, life-expectancy and well-being of individuals with each nation. These new standards are known as

## Human Development, a new standard

The Human Development approach (see annual UNDP Human Development Reports)  
The Human Capabilities approach (Sen 1999, Martha Nussbaum 2000)

In both of these approaches, gender inequality, and the work and social conditions of women are measured and compared among nations. The Gender Development Index (1995) was developed to rank nations according to how much gender equality was associated with their overall development. This proved to be one way of measuring how the benefits of development were distributed within a population.

In the 1990s, Amartya Sen and Jean Dreze wrote extensively about the worsening sex ratios in India, attempting to pinpoint the causes through comparative analysis, much as Boserup and Miller have done.

They note the worsening sex ratios in India and elsewhere in Asia.

Within India, they analyze different cases and the reasons for their development success and failure, as well as the benefits delivered to women, and the problems of regions characterized by high gender (and other) inequality.

Case studies gathered by Dreze and Sen continue to elaborate and refine the contrasts observed by Barbara Miller, as the sex ratio for India has worsened in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

- The northern state of Uttar Pradesh is a case of failure, with high (masculine) sex ratios, and low health and education indicators.
- The southern state of Kerala has more equal sex ratios, more equal labor force participation, and much higher health and education measures than Uttar Pradesh.
- A case of dramatic change is Himachal Pradesh, a hilly northern area, which 50 years ago had low education and high mortality, but has since invested in education for both sexes and has raised its educational and life expectancy to a much higher level.

## **Gender and Human Development in China.**

In 2001, another important study of gender and development was published by anthropologist and sinologist, Elizabeth Croll (2001) as a follow-up to Miller's study two decades earlier.

Croll compares different Asian nations with high sex ratios from across East and South Asia. As an anthropologist with extensive experience in China, she brings different approaches and expertise to the study of development and discrimination against daughters. She compares demographic and ethnographic narratives for their theoretical insights.

The irony is that in many Asian nations, gains in economic development are accompanied by lower fertility but increasing sex ratios. The increasing availability of sex selection techniques, such as ultrasound testing followed by abortion, has resulted in a declining proportion of daughters.

Other anthropologists, demographers, economists and political scientists continue to explore the distribution, causes and consequences of rising sex ratios in China.

- A small number of ethnographic field studies of different villages in the 1980s and 1990s explored the relationship between gender, culture, economy, state policy, and sex imbalances.
  - Shaanxi province (Greenhalgh)
  - Yunnan province (Bossen)
- A demographer taking a broad comparative perspective of China's diverse regions has also addressed the problem of rising sex ratios (Bannister)

Recently, political scientists (Hudson and den Boer) have gone beyond the human capabilities approach, and advanced the theory that contemporary rising sex ratios produce growing numbers of bachelor males. Unmarried males, they argue, have less of a stake in society and have greater tendencies toward social instability and political unrest – two conditions that are typically anti-development in their consequences for society.

Taken together, these theorists have argued that equality of the sexes promotes development, productivity, education, and that it lowers infant mortality, lowers fertility, and lowers the risk of violent upheaval.

Miller has argued that equal sex ratios are a public good.

Hudson and den Boer have argued that surplus unmarried males are a public risk.



## Conclusion

While I have attempted to give an overview of some of the important issues for anthropologists in the gender and development theories of the past 35 years, I will conclude with some observations about the specific role of anthropologists in this collaborative effort.

When economist Boserup wrote in 1970, her statistics came from the UN and her insights came from her own experiences living in India and Africa, as well as from the many anthropological field studies that she cited.

When economist Dreze and Sen include many tables of statistic from the UN and from Indian census and other surveys, they frequently turn to local field studies and their own site visits for insights into causal relationships.

When Martha Nussbaum, philosopher of gender and human development and proponent of the capabilities approach and universal human rights for women, writes about development, she draws on examples from anthropologists.

When Barabara Miller and Elizabeth Croll tackled the larger comparative problems of sex ratios in India and Asia, respectively, they combined demographic evidence with a wide selection of ethnographic studies to illustrate the dynamic relations among explanatory variables.

In each of these cases, anthropological field research was key to the integration of the various statistical indicators available. The statistics alone do not provide explanations.

Yet in each case, the limited availability of high quality ethnographic research that also includes local demographic evidence is a limiting factor in the ability to test theories.

A surprisingly small proportion of anthropological and ethnographic field studies collect any data at all on the demographic characteristics (age, sex, number of children, longevity, mortality) or quantitatively describe the educational levels or economic activities of men and women they study. In the search for compassion and authenticity, anthropologists in recent years have too often neglected to collect systematic data that might be useful to understand local conditions that people do not articulate or question.

There is clearly a need for many more anthropologists to conduct field studies that provide local demographic, social, and economic data, and for anthropologists to use their intensive cultural insights to generate theories that can be compared and tested across regions. Anthropologists have a vital role to play in stimulating new thinking about the problems of gender inequality that stalk development in many regions of the world.