Family survival in an urbanizing world.

by Irene Tinker

Many women in the Global South urban poor are becoming family heads due to the disintegration of the family caused by urbanization that entices men to work in the cities. It is aggravated by governmental policies and housing programs that prevent women from utilizing the home to produce an income while caring for the children. However, to study family survival necessitates a research on the effects of economic development to men and on women’s changing roles in the society.

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Nearly half the world’s population now lives in urban areas. Migration disrupts traditional family social support networks in both rural and urban areas and alters the traditional survival strategies of poor women and men living in informal settlements. Too often the weakened kin structures allow men to opt out of family support. Women must then earn an income while caring for their children. Working in or near the home is the solution of choice for many women. Yet governmental policies and housing programs often impede women’s ability to utilize the house as a production site despite such customary use in both urban and rural areas until this century. Lack of attention to women’s double use of housing undermines the beneficial impact of such programs and increases the degradation of the environment.

A PLACE TO LIVE

By the year 2000 half the world’s population will be living in urban areas, versus 14 percent in 1900. Of these 3 billion people, two thirds will live in the Global South. Some 20 percent of all urbanites will live in cities of 4 million or more, which includes the 23 mega-cities with populations over 10 million. Such concentrations of habitation require new approaches to planning. Many poor live in crowded slums, but more live in squatter areas:

* two thirds of the people in Nouakchott, Mauritania, or in San Salvador, El Salvador;

* more than half in Guayaquil, Ecuador, or Delhi, India;

* between 40 and 50 percent in Mexico City, Lima, Nairobi, Manila;

* even in flourishing Bangkok, 25 percent of the people live illegally.

The many factors that propel this urbanization: population increase, changing agricultural systems, globalization of the economy, the communication revolution, have contributed to the alteration of traditional value systems. On the one hand, these systems usually privileged the patriarchal family; on the other, the need to nurture the next generation required the systems to protect and support women and children. Urbanization draws men to the cities, often leaving their families behind without support. In cities, the lack of strong kin networks allows men to shirk responsibility for their children. As a result, women globally are caught in a time warp where traditional family safety nets are tearing but women’s individual rights remain subordinate.

Rights to Housing

This critical shift in familial responsibilities must be accompanied by a parallel shift in fights so that women have equal fights with men to the house in which they live and to the land around the house. Early housing efforts for the poor assumed an intact family, that is one with a male head. Even self-help housing that required sweat equity disadvantaged women who had less time to work and lacked money to pay for a replacement. As a result most urban women remained dependent for shelter on the men with whom they lived. When a woman is living with a man, he may throw her out should he fancy another woman. Married or not, women in most countries do not have title to their homes either in their own names or jointly.

In Costa Rica, women participated through the housing organization Comite Patriotico Nacional (COPAN) both in the political action to obtain housing resources and in the actual design and construction of their homes. Men from whom they had been separated frequently decided to move in and tried to claim title. In reaction, COPAN pressured the government to pass the Real Equality Bill in 1990. This exemplary legislation granted women household heads the fight to register government-supported housing in their own names; if women were married, the house was registered in the names of both wife and husband (Sagot 1994).

In Bangladesh, the Grameen Bank offers loans to its members to build tiny rural homes that measure about ten by twenty feet. In order to prevent these houses from being washed away in the frequent devastating floods, four to six reinforced concrete poles support a tin roof; water may sweep away the woven mat walls, but the structure survives. An evaluation in 1989 noted that nearly 95 percent of these loans were to women to build on land.
Family survival in an urbanizing world.

they owned; if their families would not deed them the land, loans to purchase the site were given before loans for construction (Islam et al. 1989). In this traditional Muslim society, hundreds of poor women now own their homes and if they are divorced or deserted women they can no longer be dispossessed!

Women also require tenancy fights when they rent their living quarters. Increasingly, in densely settled urban areas, centrally located open space for squatting on public land - such as along rights-of-way for railroads or high-tension wires, in ravines, or along rivers - is fast disappearing. So migrants rent. It may be a room in a housing project or the second story of the squatter’s house. The middle classes in many countries compensate for falling income by renting out rooms. Families may rent space in the back yards of older settlements in order to build a house; the rent usually includes using whatever water and sanitary facilities exist on site. Low-income housing in Africa, where metropolitan areas are still less densely settled than most Latin American and Asian cities, favors worker “lines,” rows of connected rooms with cooking space outside in the rear; facilities may be partly or entirely shared. Older apartment houses rapidly deteriorate into slums as families crowd into a single room. In all these instances, women are often unable to rent in their own right under existing laws. If she must be represented or have a co-signer a woman remains dependent on her male kin: her husband, brother, or father.

What Type of Housing?

Women raising children alone need help. Rural villages used to provide this sort of fallback assistance. In Guadalajara, Mexico, women household heads preferred living in shared tenements. Rooms were grouped around a central courtyard which was gated at the entrance creating a safe play area for children. Despite the inconvenience of common washing and toilet facilities, the shared space fostered a sense of community (Miraftab 1994). Many types of shared and co-housing are being tried in Canada and the United States in a effort to create this sense of community and also to provide single mothers with housing made affordable by shared facilities (Dandekar 1993).

Shared housing for the elderly is also being tried in various countries; mixing elderly and young families in settlements, but not in the same buildings, has advantages in the quality of life not sufficiently weighed. In the few examples of such an experiment, the elderly form bonds with young families, often baby-sitting and personally benefitting from the sense of involvement. For elderly wishing to stay in their own homes, changes in zoning are needed.

Unfortunately, planners often oppose the renting of rooms or the creation of units in areas of single family homes; in the United States, even “mother-in-law” suites are often illegal under local zoning laws. Where zoning laws are less a problem, as they are in much of Latin America, single-family squatter homes are often built so that each of the tiny rooms has an outside door. As children grow up and move away, rooms can be rented; if married children want to return, they can have a measure of privacy. Whether in the industrialized or developing countries, rental fees may be central to the older woman’s survival (Tinker 1994). Information on these alternative housing styles needs to be collected and disseminated.

Basic Services

Availability of water and toilets is critical for a healthy existence. A Juhu Beach squatter area outside Bombay has one latrine for every 134 people and one faucet for every 673 people (Varghese 1993). Proposals for water-home sewage systems for Jakarta were so costly that five such plans have been shelved. Alternative water-seal double receptacle pit latrines have been successfully used in Ahmedabad, India, for a over a decade. Growing interest in urban gardens, discussed below, is paired with greater use of composting and biogas digesters in urban areas. These alternatives need further evaluation; good models should be promoted to local governments and NGOs.

Energy for household cooking is also a critical need. Continuing use of biomass cookstoves has contributed to urban pollution; improved charcoal braziers, promoted through appropriate technology circles, are more efficient. But in mega-cities where homes are multistoried, liquid petroleum gas or electricity are favored forms. In rapidly modernizing Thailand, 18 percent of families in Bangkok, and 20 percent in Chonburi never cook but prefer to eat out, largely consuming street foods. In Bangkok, 23 percent of the housing stock consists of rooms only, without kitchens; but plugging in an electric rice cooker is easy in a single room. Although inventive cooks can apparently produce a meal in the cooker, 48 percent of the average household budget is spent on prepared food eaten out or brought home. Preparing and selling street foods provides income for urban families around the world and is dominated by women in many, but not all, countries (Tinker 1996).

INTERSECTION OF HOUSING AND WORK

In the rush to modernize cities, the traditional concepts of shelter as a site for production and reproduction was replaced by the residential model of homes. This perception continues to influence local zoning codes as...
Family survival in an urbanizing world.

well as projects supported by the United Nations Center for Human Settlements (UNCHS). For example, squatters who had been relocated in desirable downtown Jakarta walkup apartments built with help from UNCHS sold out to middle-class tenants because they could not continue their productive enterprises in cramped space above the streets (Tinker 1993). More dramatic, in 1994 police burned corn crops in urban backyards in Harare, Zimbabwe, despite near famine conditions in that country.

Earning from Home-Based Production

NGOs encourage self-help housing, but misunderstand the interaction of home and work by constructing community centers for income activities. Economists have noted that the locational aspects of home-based family-operated enterprises represent the comparative advantage of the informal sector over formal industry: flexible labor supply and free working space (Strassmann 1987). In fact it is this aspect of working at home that has caused many feminists to oppose home work as inimicable to women because the male household head controls both women’s labor and the use of the house. They note that many microenterprise projects, based in community centers or at home, have been subverted by men precisely because they felt they were losing control of their wives.

Basic to this debate is whether home based work represents oppression or opportunity. Industrial home-work, also called putting-out, has long been opposed by trade unions as exploitative and impossible to control (Boris and Prugl 1996). With the informalization of the global economy, subcontracting and putting-out have increased. A study in Mexico City of the electronics industry showed multiple levels of subcontracting in which women were clustered at the bottom of the pyramid in often illegal tiny or single person enterprises where piece rates resulted in low wages. Yet, the study concluded that their income, no matter how small, improved not only their bargaining position within their family, but the nutritional level of their children (Beneria and Roldan 1987). These findings are consistent with a growing literature that demonstrates the importance of income in increasing women’s chance to win at “cooperative conflict” in the household (A. Sen 1990) and with studies showing that women’s income, more than men’s, is used for the well-being of children (Senauer 1990; Engle 1995). It even "alters established patterns of social/spatial interaction," that is, the way different spaces in and around the house are used and by whom, according to research in Guadalajara (Miraftab 1994:468).

Unpaid family labor does not always have the same impact, though even unpaid agricultural labor may increase the patriarchal bargaining (Kandiyoti 1988).

Cultural variations are immense regarding the impact of family labor versus earned income. A recent study of Taiwan home-based industry sharpens this contrast by showing that women’s status did not improve in homes where their work was unpaid family labor; in contrast, women working in their neighbor’s enterprises for wages gained in status (Gallin 1995).

In some cultures, families appear more cooperative than conflictual when survival is the issue. Street food vending seemed frequently to be a truly family enterprise in as diverse cities as Iloilo, Philippines; Bogor, Indonesia; Minia, Egypt; and Kingston, Jamaica. In a small Bangladeshi town, the only visible vendors were destitute women with no male family members to front for them; but 37 percent of vendors relied on female relatives to make the food they sold. In the two African cities studied (in Nigeria and Senegal), the influence of separate budgets made vending income crucial to the women and their children. A majority of vendors in most of these countries made the food they sold at home. Neighbors might make the same product and sell to traders or contract to sell directly to customers. Both street food vendors and food producers are successful microentrepreneurs (Tinker 1996).

Although I have used these two terms, industrial home-based work and microenterprise, almost synonymously, the two concepts are frequently considered to be diametrically opposed (see authors in Rakowski 1994 for both sides). Ever since the International Labour Organization began discussions on a possible Convention on Home Based Work a decade ago, the conflict seems to have softened because both groups believe the convention would exert pressure on their governments to take action on behalf of homeworkers (Prugl and Tinker, forthcoming). As noted, women supporting regulation and those supporting microenterprise have recognized that women home workers are distinct in many respects both from industrial workers or from small entrepreneurs. Both groups are sensitive to needs which arise from the child care obligations of homeworkers and of their lack of power vis-a-vis their husbands. One leading advocate for the new convention is the Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) of Ahmedabad, India, which organizes very poor working women in India. Renana Jhabvala, SEWA’s secretary, asserts that the organization found inspiration in three separate movements: trade unions, cooperatives, and the women’s movement, "and sees itself as part of a new movement of the self-employed which has arisen from the merging of all three" (1994: 117).

In Asia, homeworker organizing groups have been surprisingly successful. SEWA has been able to organize more than 10,000 homeworkers; a newly established
Family survival in an urbanizing world.

national homemaker organization established in the Philippines in 1989 attracted thousands of homeworkers within a short time period and has now chapters in 22 provinces (Lazo 1996). Together with their British counterparts, these groups have established an international network of homemaker advocacy groups, called Homenet International, which is coordinating international advocacy work and functions as a clearinghouse.

Urban Food Production

People in a quarter of the largest 100 metropolitan areas in the world spend at least half their household incomes on food. Obviously, home grown and raised food reduces food expenditures. Equally important, food production can be a potent source of income. Women in urban Egypt have for decades sold butter and cheese made from milk drawn from cattle stabled in their homes. River beds and vacant lots are filled with vegetables in most cities. In Africa some writers talk of the greening of the cities as families grow and sell eggs, meats, and even staples to support themselves (Egziabher et al. 1994). Specialty herb growing brought vitality to depressed sections of the Bronx in New York City. Fish ponds are a familiar sight in Asian cities, many within city limits.

Yet again our vision of "urban" seldom includes more than the casual backyard garden. Data on the amounts of crops grown or animals, fish, and poultry raised are minimal. What studies do exist lack any methodological coherence and so are not comparable. Common definitions are needed for such fuzzy terms as "urban" and "production" and "value" before studies of urban food production will have the policy impact that is necessary to shift the current perceptions that food production is only a rural activity.

WOMEN AND FAMILY

A potent cause of poverty among women globally is that they are household heads. The disintegration of family has undermined the social safety nets that were traditionally supposed to be a given. Even when men are resident in the home, women may be the major providers, as Helen Safa points out in her new book The Myth of the Male Breadwinner (1995). But equal pay is hardly a global phenomenon, and women with children cannot always arrange/afford to leave the house.

Feminist responses to this trend have been to support single mothers with child care and new job opportunities. While all of this is laudable, the result for the women is a burdened life of the double day. Voices of women from the Global South increasingly complain that Northern feminists place too much emphasis on individual rights while Southern feminists place greater importance on the values of family and community (IURD 1994). In the United States, some feminists concerned with the conservative appropriation of the term are cautiously writing of the need to reimagine the family (Cohen 1993; Jaquette 1993). Justice would suggest that men need to help support the families they create; for this approach to be effective, men must also be brought back into the families and increase their childcare roles (Bruce et al. 1995).

How to do this with equity and justice, and not recreate the coercive and abusive family patterns all too familiar in contemporary life, is indeed a challenge. A way to start is to develop a body of research on the impact of rapid economic development on men comparable to the studies on women’s changing economic roles in society that had provided the base for many policy shifts. Critical, too, are studies on how different cultures and countries have responded to their internal economic transformation with measures that impact on the family, supporting or undercutting its functions and encouraging adaptation or resistance to new gender relationships. Perhaps as a result the twenty-first century will see a truly equitable family structure emerging.

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Family survival in an urbanizing world.

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