

## Women's solidarity – and divisions among women

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One of contemporary feminist theory's main contributions to the study of women was to rediscover shared gender as a basis for solidarity and common interests, and different gender as a basis for division of interests and ideological dissonance. In elaborating a view of gender relations which would be helpful in investigating empirical Third World situations, we have given a central place to the conflicts of interests between men and women [IDS 1979; Young et al eds 1981]. This brief article derives from the other equally important starting point — that 'women' do not and cannot constitute a homogeneous category.<sup>1</sup> Clearly they are not 'all the same' in the first sense that the social relations between the genders may vary for the women of any one society. But furthermore women experience significant variation in their situations in those wider areas of political, economic and social subordination and inequality which are not confined to the social relations of gender. These differences imply that it is critical, methodologically, to think through quite carefully the basis for women's solidarity and common interests and to do this in such a way as to allow for the possibility of divisions between women. In investigating any given empirical situation we need to ask what it is that unites, and what it is that divides these women, and what kind or category of women this particular piece of research is concerned with.

### Women's Solidarity

One basis for women's solidarity is the concrete interests which women, as a gender, do share. Male violence and coercive forms of heterosexuality leading to violence, rape and wife-battering and issues surrounding reproduction and mothering (eg abortion, contraception, maternal and child health care, child care provision) provide women with an explicit basis for gender solidarity. Women may also have common interests in relation to patriarchal kinship groups and

the role these play in oppressive forms of the marriage institution (those in which there are marriage payments, no choice of partner, no choice of remaining single, treatment of widows, right to divorce etc). A further basis to women's solidarity may lie in aspects of their relation to the state, eg on issues of franchise, emancipation, property ownership, and legal rights. Nevertheless, although in relation to such matters as these, women, as a category, may well have strong interests in common against men and the state, this does not imply that all women will share these interests equally, nor that in all circumstances they will prioritise them. Divisions between women may be sufficiently strong to offset these potential bases for solidarity, and it is discussion of these that forms the major part of this article.

### Female Networks and Survival Strategies

Women often have a common interest in another sense — they may share the experience of recurring crises. These may be of access to money and labour, as well as those, such as illness or eviction, which threaten their capacity for daily survival. Most studies have shown that poor women, as well as women who are independent child-rearers, maintain significant female networks which function as daily or weekly or annual safety nets [IDS 1981]. However, when thinking about sources of female support, it is essential to make the point that they may be accompanied by some costs. These costs will vary and may be transcended, but they may be summarised as women's capacity to exert social control over each other.

My own first research was with a stable rural community in Herefordshire, in which family and kinship networks were significant for many residents, and where women relied on each other very heavily, both in day to day crises, and over a lifetime [Whitehead 1976].

I found that older women, mothers and friends, were highly coercive in relation to young wives. It was this coercion, in addition to that exerted by men, which

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<sup>1</sup>The short discussion in this paper is taken from a longer unpublished manuscript on 'Conflict and consensus models in the analysis of gender relations'.

served to socialise the young wives into the highly oppressive and rigid behaviour appropriate to young married women. I suspect all closely-knit networks of women allow relatively little deviation from female norms, for while female networks may be very supportive, they are also the locus for the elaboration and enforcement of what constitutes proper, allowable, reasonable, female behaviour. It is a measure of the power of such networks that they can be extremely cruel in dealing with deviants.

At the same time, solidarity based on the need for mutual support in situations of crisis can create the conditions for political mobilisation. There are important historical and contemporary examples of women in collective crisis situations using the close-textured informal web of their community links to exert political and economic demands. Sisterly solidarity which is materially founded in this way appears to facilitate radical action. This may also be a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for the expression of overt antagonism against men as a gender.

In short, female networks which can constrain can also be extremely supportive, radical and militant. Perhaps the potential for both coexist uneasily wherever dense gender networks prevail. My own view is that when these female networks are primarily composed of friends and of neighbours, of women of similar age, or who share similar life circumstances, they are more likely to carry the potential for mobilisation than when they are composed of women in hierarchical kinship relations. Social control, it seems, is more often exerted through those female links which form part of the authority structures between women, especially those which form the basis for some of the divisions between women to be considered in the next section.

### **Divisions of Interest among Women**

Marxist feminists take the view that there are significant divisions of interest between bourgeois women and proletarian women in capitalist societies. In Britain the implications of this view for an integrated feminist politics provide the basis for the major political divisions within the feminist movement. In some ways the significance of class divisions between women is infinitely more important in developing countries. Rapid economic transformation is a much more dominant feature of the overall societal and economic situation and substantial changes in the class structure are often taking place. Initially then, in setting up the methodological questions around the theme of gender and class, it is important to comprehend the often highly specific constellation of the class relations which are at issue.

Substantial differences in the form of agrarian class relations are to be found in Africa as compared with,

say, South-east Asia and Latin America. Although socially and economically heterogeneous classes based on access to land and other productive resources may exist, in other situations there may be minimal development of restricted access to land, and of capital accumulation, so that one may be dealing with a more homogeneous community of owner-producers. Antagonistic class relations may dominate those areas and agrarian systems with a substantial landless, proletarian, or pauperised class. Nevertheless, it is necessary to translate this general perspective into specific questions about the divisions of interest between women which arise as a consequence of the agrarian class structure, or of class antagonisms. Although the general direction of these divisions is clear, it is by no means apparent what the nature of the conflicts of interest between women might be under given historical and empirical conditions. In order to illustrate this problem let me sketch an example which I have examined at length elsewhere [Whitehead 1981].

In Bangladesh, paddy processing is traditionally women's work carried out within the confines of the homestead (*bari*), using a *dheki* (a modified pestle and mortar technique). Women work in seclusion in the *bari* and although middle-income households use family labour, richer households hire in poorer women from landless, or near landless, households to perform this arduous task on a client basis. Landless women are often highly dependent at moments of subsistence crisis on the households for whom they husk rice. Increases in yields as a result of HYV innovation have been accompanied by the accelerated informal diffusion of a custom miller, which is a very much more productive technology for paddy processing. The cost differential between the two techniques makes it economically rational for any agricultural family with cash to switch to mechanised milling. However, while the custom miller creates male employment, as waged work, it does not create any employment for women. It thus effectively displaces female labour from homestead paddy processing.

But the effect of this displacement on 'women' is not clear-cut. Where paddy processing is done by family labour, mechanised milling represents a considerable reduction of women's unpaid work. But for the women from poor and landless peasant households, for whom client work in *bari*-based rice processing was a highly significant source of subsistence in kind, the identical technological innovation has the opposite and adverse effect. No jobs are created and there are no alternative income-generating opportunities for these women. This is the reason why a number of policy discussions of women and work in Bangladesh call for a curb to the spread of mechanised rice milling.

But the *dheki* technique is enormously hard work, and provides a pitifully small income. Thus, in addition to liberating middle-income peasant women, it is a form of work which would be highly appropriate for technological innovation to improve women's welfare — and indeed we find other policy documents arguing for it on these grounds. In this case, it is class which is determining the form of social relations under which women work, and it is these social relations which mediate the form in which the relation between class and one specific technological change is being experienced.

There is, however, a more general methodological sense in which the issue of class membership for women is not self-evident in Third World situations. There is a considerable literature, referring to industrialised societies, which criticises the methodological, and sometimes the theoretical assumption, that a woman's class position is defined by her husband's occupation. In developing country contexts, the question of whether a woman is in the same class as her husband when she has an occupation of her own is, if anything, more interesting and ambiguous. It is very common for women to occupy different economic sectors from their husbands, being more frequently associated with either the self-provisioning (subsistence) or the informal sector. Similarly, there is much evidence that familial and household resources may not by any means be freely available to the female members of the household. In other words their class

interests as property owners cannot necessarily be identified with those of male household heads. The implication of wives' location in the economy as compared with their husbands, and of inter-household resource allocations, for an analysis of unity and conflict of interest in class terms between women needs urgent elaboration.

### **Divisions between Women through family and Kinship Structures**

In this context, I should like to elaborate an obvious form of divisions between women — that which derives from their particularised relation to the family and to kinship structures. By and large women are 'enclosed' to some degree in family/household and kinship structures in which they are not the primary or dominant members, in terms of resources, legal status, and capacity to exercise power. Their form of membership often constructs them, ideologically, as having primary loyalties to these institutions. Insofar as interests in the common fate of their members are ideologically enscribed as the dominant locus of solidarity, this effectively prevents women from establishing solidarity links outside. This is in contrast to men who under some, though not all, circumstances, have an involvement in extra-familial, extra-household and extra-kin group activities which create over-arching ties. These ties are with other men, and provide a basis for (male) solidarity as well as, of course, for (male) competition.



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I think this is an important point. It implies not only that the constructed relationship of men and of women to these familial or kinship institutions is different, but that under some circumstances familial ideology may be emphasised and so prevent women from maintaining or creating solidarity links outside families or households or kin-groups. In Third World contexts we can identify at least two constellations of political ideology which take a position on 'the family', which are directly relevant to this point. Socialist countries often adopt policies which take 'the family' as the building block, or the cell of state policy, even though there are contradictions in the notion that the individual's responsibility to this unit is primary, and takes precedence over the family's responsibilities to the wider collectivity [White 1982].

A quite different kind of familial ideology is associated both with certain nationalist political ideologies and with some forms of liberal bourgeois Western intervention in the field of development.<sup>2</sup> This familial ideology is associated with a view of 'women' in which there is not seen to be any fundamental conflict between men and women which might justify the term subordination. Rather, the treatment of women by 'society' is seen as a historical lag, a hangover from earlier politics and ideologies. Rights for women or the amelioration of non-progressive customs are seen as a mark of civilisation, democracy, or progress [Wolkowitz 1982]. The status and role of women comes to figure in these political ideologies in a particular way and the problem itself is located at an ideological or a cultural level. These ideologies are often particularly resistant to the notion of the family being other than a highly cooperative unit in which all members have a place, and which functions as the building block of a moral, progressive, society. It is probably worth highlighting yet again, that these ideologies are ones in which women's relationship to the family is constructed as primarily that of loyalty. As such, this creates conditions in which the establishment of ties outside may be difficult.

### Other Divisions of Interest among Women

In terms of planning and policy it is also critical to appreciate important forms of division between women which are neither class-based nor derived from women's fragmentation on the basis of particular family membership. Rural-urban differences are one obvious example, while women may be divided on the basis of where they are in their life cycles or in the form of developmental cycle and personal biography they have experienced.

<sup>2</sup>For a discussion of the role of familial ideologies in relation to other political ideologies see Barrett and McIntosh [1982].

## Developmental Cycles and Life Cycles Effects

The recent literature on Third World women's employment has paid increasing attention to the labour market behaviour of young women. There is growing evidence to show that this group is highly exploited by both employer and family. The young women enter the labour market to earn relatively low rates of return for work done, and the mode of payment often precludes personal control of their earnings. The examples which spring to mind are the way in which young women of this kind figure in the runaway industries; in domestic service in urban areas in a number of continents; and as casual, rural wage employed (in Java for example). A further shared characteristic of these young women is that they generally have the status of daughters in household and family situations. They are, that is, unmarried and would be ordinarily living with parents. In some cases the capacity to exploit daughters in this way derives from the wage employment situation being one which requires either migration or simple daily mobility which may not be open to mothers/wives/widows. But it appears that the structure of authority within the family-based household interacts with the structure of the labour market in such a way that daughters can be made to do forms of labour for forms of reward which other female statuses within the household cannot.



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*Food preparation: mother and daughter-in-law working together*



In one sense daughters are simply a constituent of a wider category of forms of potential exploitation of female labour by family members who may be other women. It is extremely common for women to use female labour, on the basis of familial and kinship links, for petty commodity and petty trading activities. The female child helping the West African street-corner seller is a familiar image: the daughter is obliged to work for her mother for no reward. In addition to the provision of labour for petty commodity production and petty trading, junior females are also used frequently for the child care that frees older or senior women to earn. In many areas in Africa, the marriage system, involving as it often does, polygamy, and the tendency in some circumstances for household structures to be complex, leads to a senior woman having potential access to the labour of female household members who vary in terms of age, competence, strength and skill. Another example of the female exploitation of female labour is in the obligation of an inmarrying daughter-in-law to perform domestic and non-domestic household labour for a mother-in-law.

These uses of junior or dependent female labour may create a division of interest between the women. The creation of certain kinds of rural employment or income for those dependent women who normally perform domestic, child care, agricultural, or trading labour services for their mothers or for senior females, may not be welcomed by the latter. In this case specific household and family structures combine with the working through of the developmental cycle of those groups to produce temporary but significant divisions of interest between women. We can see a specific set of social relationships between women as cutting across the potential basis for solidarity that exists because of the commonness of their situation. The research point which is raised is the importance of distinguishing whether women's labour is being provided primarily by them as wives, as daughters, or as widows and separated women.

Marital status is an equally important dimension to think through in relation to women's interests in other policy issues. A good example of this is to be found in Gita Sen's discussion of the implication of the notion of family wage [Sen 1980]. She argues that the interests of working wives in relations to male wages which include an element for the dependent wife are different from those of the single woman or those of the single woman with dependent children whose wage requirements take a different form. There are a number of obvious ways in which whether one is a working wife, working single parent, or single woman, may be critical to the kind of policies on women that Third World countries want to adopt.

## Rural/Urban

The much discussed issue of rural-urban divisions is obviously relevant to women. Although economic and employment policies are highly significant, certain other less obvious differences should be borne in mind. In particular, the whole relation of family, household and kinship structures to the forms of production, the nature of the economy and the work of biological and social reproduction may differ so markedly that ideological and legal reforms relating to these institutions, which may be quite emancipatory to urban women, may not have the same effects in rural areas. A simple example of this is reform of marriage laws to outlaw polygamy and marriage payments of either the dowry or bride wealth form. In certain parts of Africa this may well have the effect of increasing the number of pauperised, old, rural women. Thus efforts by younger women living in towns, who have access to salaries or wage work, to change the laws relating to marriage may find that their lead is not followed by many sections of rural women. Similarly, the implications of Elisabeth Croll's work on the persistence of marriage payments in rural China are to be pondered on not simply as examples of the objectification of women's labour, but in terms of the important relation between legal and customary practices surrounding marriage and the system of production and exchange [Croll 1981].

## Conclusion

My main aim in this discussion has been to be brief, exploratory and untheorised, yet conceptual. I have tried to give some substance to the view that in terms of putting research plans into operation it is essential to examine the ways in which women are not a simple undifferentiated empirical category. I have tried to alert other workers to a number of what I consider to be the most immediately obvious dimensions along which women's situations may vary. Implicitly or explicitly, the point is that women's subjective and objective responses to changes, planned and unplanned, will be affected by these varied circumstances.

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