

WOMEN'S HOUSEHOLD ENVIRONMENTAL CARING ROLES IN THE GREATER ACCRA METROPOLITAN AREA: A QUALITATIVE APPRAISAL

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Abstract

Women play key roles in the care and management of the home and in environment affecting health risks and family well being. Results from a qualitative survey in Accra indicate that environment problems in and around the homes are a particularly serious health burden for women and children, escalated by poverty. These issues warrant more attention in environmental debates and programs. Improvements need to come with better economic conditions and improved services, but also through changes in gender relations to the advantage of women. Such changes will improve power relations.

Résumé

Les femmes jouent un rôle clé dans l'entretien, et la gestion des foyers et de l'environnement et influent sur les risques sanitaires et le bien-être familial. Le résultat d'un sondage qualitatif mené à Accra montre que les problèmes liés à l'environnement autour des maisons posent des problèmes sanitaires extrêmement sérieux aux femmes et aux enfants. Ces problèmes sont aggravés par la pauvreté. Cette situation demande que l'on se prenne sérieusement aux débats et programmes portant sur l'environnement. Le progrès doit être accompagné de meilleures conditions économiques et une amélioration des services par le biais des changements dans les relations en matière de genre au profit des femmes. Un tel changement pourrait améliorer le pouvoir de la femme.

Introduction

In societies the world over, women are both producers and carers; they care for children, for old people, the sick, the handicapped, and others who cannot look after themselves. They serve the household with food, cleanliness, clothing, and in many cases water and fuel. (Vickers 1993).

Since women, as opposed to men, play a pre-eminent role in the care and management of the home and its environs, the household environment can be said to be engendered. Moreover, the home and neighborhood environments are especially critical to the health and well being of children, the elderly and, among active adults, women. Adult men tend to spend more time away from home, and thus face fewer of its environmental hazards. For many women, especially those categorized as housewives or homemakers, the place where they live is also the place where they work (Muller and Plantenga 1990).

It is, therefore, of special relevance to women, children and the elderly that in many cities in low income developing countries the most significant environmental health hazards tend to be encountered within people's houses and neighborhoods.

The immediate environmental threats for the residents of these cities are not long-term global warming, cumulative exposure to carcinogens, or even decade-long desertification but rather the life and death immediacy of malaria, respiratory illness, and diarrhea. Their threats are derived in part from household environments characterized by indoor air pollution, a bug-filled outdoors, near-the-door faeces, and far-from-the door water. There are also the dangers connected with the use of insect sprays, uncontrolled sewage, and ambient air pollution (Kates 1994; see also Benneh et al., 1993; Songsore and McGranahan 1993; McGranahan and Songsore 1994).

In Ghana, the few readily available statistics on housekeeping activities indicate that at every age, females contribute more than males, but that the difference is especially large among adults (Ghana Statistical Service, 1995). This confirms the general perception that women bear an inordinate share of the labour burden of household environmental management (Ardayfio-Schandorf, 1993; Oppong 1994).

Like rural women, urban women are also wholly responsible for domestic work although they are able to rely, to a greater extent, on paid assistants or unpaid family helpers. Removed from the support of immediate kin, urban women are experiencing increased conflicts between their domestic chores, employment and other responsibilities. In most households, women are left to make their own arrangements and there is a strict division of labour between 'house matters' and more important questions befitting of male intervention or mediation. This is a reflection of patriarchal ideology and practice and appears to occur irrespective of the educational level of men or rural or urban location of the household. Where households can afford it, they employ housemaids, who are usually girls, which in turn contributes to the problem of child labour discussed earlier. Other families use the services of daughters to perform domestic functions, perpetuating the myth of the femininity of household tasks (ROG/UNICEF 1990).

Far from being egalitarian and harmonious units, households have a hierarchy mediated by gender, age and kinship. Both the state and all social groups in Ghana recognize the man as the head of household. The patriarchal construct of the household underpins power relations between the sexes and who has control over what assets and who takes what decisions forms the basis of both co-operation and conflict within the household (Friedmann 1992). Women as home managers and housewives are in a subordinate relationship to husbands within the subsistence production of the household. There is an economic element to this subordination: to the extent that men can retain preferential access to liquid financial resources, they both reinforce their own power within the household, and can often cushion themselves against the worst deprivations of poverty. As a result, "Poor men in the developing world have even poorer wives and children" (Vickers, 1993). But the reasons why women are the most exposed to household environmental hazards go beyond their relative poverty.

Other cities might well yield very different results. However, several features of the situation in Accra undoubtedly represent broad tendencies. We have argued elsewhere that the environmental problems of the poor tend to be more local and more directly threatening to health than the environmental problems of the wealthy (McGranahan and Songsore 1994). It would seem from this more gender-sensitive analysis, that the environmental problems of poverty are also more prone to be a burden for women and to affect the health of children. Recognizing the inadequacy and pitfalls of both gender-blind approaches to environmental problems and those which merely provide a narrative of women's roles, the paper approaches this analysis from a micro political-economy perspective.

The focus of the present paper is to examine and make more "visible" the role of women as the principal managers of the household environment and the range of burdens women in different social classes face as a result of this environmental care. More specifically, it presents an account of the internal structure of the household and its relations with the wider society. This is followed by the

presentation of a conceptual model of engendered environmental niches as a tool for analysing household environmental care and a qualitative account of women's environmental redressing of these gender inequalities.

Data Sources and Methodology

This paper draws on a section of a much broader study of women and household environmental care in the Greater Accra Metropolitan Area, of which the main findings and detailed methodologies have been presented in the initial report (Songsore and McGranahan, 1996). These involved both the use of quantitative and qualitative research methods. The initial quantitative study was based on i) a sample survey of 1000 representative households and ii) physical tests of water quality and exposure to air pollution for a subset of 200 households (Benneh et al. 1993; Songsore and McGranahan 1993).

The empirical data from the main quantitative survey enable statistical analysis to be carried out on some of the inter-relations of gender, environment and epidemiology at the household and neighbourhood levels (Songsore and McGranahan, 1996; 1998). The data fails, however, to even begin to capture the intra-household struggles and the politics of environmental management through which many of these problems emerge. Such micro-politics are especially critical to the poor majority living in compound housing units, where environmental health risks are severe, and the management tasks are complex. Owing to the architecture of this compound housing, but also for other reasons, the environmental management problems of the poor are less segmented into individual household tasks, and almost inevitably involve more conflict and /or co-operation among households.

This gap was subsequently addressed by the use of qualitative research methods such as in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation. This follow-up research was conducted in the low-income neighbourhoods of Nima, Ashaiman, Mampobi, Jamestown and Old Ashaley-Botwe. These five areas covered different socio-ecological zones where low-income households live in the metropolis. The research within each neighbourhood included:

- i) in-depth interviews with five women of representative households living in household compounds in each area; and
- ii) focus group discussions with selected women's and men's groups or associations in the same area.

The current paper is largely a narrative of the results of the qualitative survey which appeared in section one of an earlier, larger publication (see Songsore and McGranahan 1996).

The Internal Structure of the Household and its Relations with the Wider Society

Gender relations within the household

The secondary or subordinate status of women in the Greater Accra Metropolitan Area appears to be universally considered the norm, despite considerable cultural diversity and some recent erosion of men's relative power (see the next section). Both women's groups and men's groups acknowledge the man as the head of the household, whether in the nuclear household consisting of man, wife and children or in the multi-generational extended family. As stated in one of the women's focus group discussions, "since it was the man who married the woman, and takes care of all members of the household, he is the head." Women generally seemed to feel that this man ought to provide guidance, protection, support and care to all members of the household.

This view was reiterated by the men, who put it only slightly differently, "it is the man who has married the woman, so it is his responsibility to provide for the house, and hence he is the head." Men also emphasized the decision-making aspects of male leadership. As one male respondent crudely put

it, "the man gives orders; and the orders he gives must be obeyed by the woman first and foremost, then the children will follow suit. Then everything will go on well in the home". In Ghanaian society generally, and among men in particular, the assertive female is abhorred and labeled a "he-woman". "There are many instances where a wealthy woman owns the 'marital' house and supports the family-husband included - yet the authority figure in the house remains the man" (Aidoo 1985:25).

It is therefore not surprising that a number of writers have drawn attention to the hierarchical and patriarchal structure of most households, with the household and family as the arena of women's subordination and the architecture of discriminatory gender roles. "The feminist appraisal opened for public view the privacy of family life and exposed not only affection and protection but also inequality and misogyny" (O'Connell 1994)

This unequal power between men and women is manifest in spheres such as access to and control of resources, decision-making powers in the allocation of resources, control of decisions on reproduction, what economic activities wives can undertake, and the allocation of tasks at the household level. The notion of the male "breadwinner" is common, but most men keep the size of their earnings secret, and the woman is often expected to manage with whatever "chop money" she is given, making up for deficits from her own resources. Auntie Vic represented this common problem well. She said her husband, a fisherman, rarely discloses his income, especially during the fishing season in August. She claims that he spends a lot on girls, drinks and friends. These days, she has learnt a few tricks to enable her to keep a bit of what she gets from selling his fish. She says that for most of the year she uses money from baking bread and frying doughnuts to take care of the family. Her husband is therefore not the sole provider for the home; she actually contributes almost all her earnings to feed, clothe and educate the children.

Men do not necessarily see this type of arrangement as reflecting the deprivation of women. As one male respondent in the indigenous Ga settlement of Jamestown puts it. "In this community, the women generally earn higher incomes than the men. This is largely due to their trading activities. So if the men should pool financial resources with the women, the latter will not respect them." Another took the view that many women have developed the tendency of exploiting their male partners, and want to use the man's money without controls. "The woman hides her money in such places that it would take a thief to locate it. The only time you, the man, will know that your wife has money is when she puts on a new cloth. She can even tell you that she bought it on credit and so get you to pay for it. So if you make the mistake of keeping a joint account with your wife, you are just about a few steps from your grave".

By contrast, women respondents (both individually and in group discussions) held that men, especially when men and women pool resources together in joint economic ventures, tend to monopolise income to the exclusion of women. Because of men's tendency to take control of such earnings, women vegetable (pepper) growers in the peri-urban settlement of Old Ashaley-Botwe have decided to establish their own independent farms so that they can control the income that is generated directly. There is, however, considerable intra-urban variation between and within residential areas depending on the cultural setting, level of education of household members and the economic status of the household and of the particular woman.

In the old, typically low income, indigenous Ga neighbourhoods of central Accra, such as Jamestown and Mamprobi, and in the Ga villages found in the rural fringe, women tend to exhibit considerable autonomy in decision-making and control of resources. This is partially due to the duoloccal pattern of residence of husband and wife; the cultural norm is for each to reside in a compound house of their pre-marital family. There is also a long tradition of independent commercial activity amongst the women. Many women appreciated the freedom associated with living apart from their husbands. One woman who was divorced by her first husband because of her (assumed) infidelity said, "If you live together with your husband you feel ill at ease; it is better when you go and see him occasionally" (Robertson

1993: 66). However, most upwardly mobile Ga men and women, once they have moved out of these communities, live neolocally, i.e. co-residentially, in the newly developed mixed neighbourhoods.

By contrast, in low income, migrant communities such as Nima and Ashaiman, the control of decision-making by men tended to be more complete. Most migrant women did not have an equally strong footing in commerce, and lived co-residentially with husbands who in most cases earned higher incomes. Polygynous marriages also tend to be both unstable and very undemocratic in their internal organization.

Economic Crisis, Women's Empowerment and Changing Gender Relations

The power of men within the household has come under threat from two processes: economic crisis and the growing unemployment of men on the one hand; and the reverberations of the global movement for the empowerment of women on the other.

Although the economic conditions of households in general have deteriorated in recent decades, and continue to deteriorate, women as a group have experienced some measure of progress in education, income earning abilities and their overall status in society. In general, it was the men who most clearly articulated this looming threat to their hegemony over women. As the men's group in Mamprobi put it. "One can say that in the past men's control over their wives was somehow absolute. But this control is diminishing. One can attribute this to the general trends of economic hardships which have made some men exist only in name." This view was reiterated by other men's groups in the low-income neighbourhoods surveyed.

The industrial workers of Ashaiman carried the same message: "We are in a community where we count much on industrial work and other wage employment. In recent times many men have been laid off in an attempt to restructure the economy. So the women have taken over the headship of many households because they provide the money". In support of this view the poor fishermen and working class elements in the blighted inner city residential district of Jamestown argued that "Often when the man is unemployed the woman takes control. She is the one who has the money and so if you dare display your authority the cash flow will stop so she becomes the head."

Although in group discussions and in-depth interviews women also stressed their growing role in generating household income, most women saw it more in terms of an increase in the pressure on their labour time than an increase in their power over men. This "reproductive squeeze" has led many women to disrespect their male partners, and disapprove of their discretionary consumption.

According to Auntie Stella of Mamprobi: 'In the olden days the men worked and took good care of their families. These days a lot of them have no proper work to do – just bits of fishing work, company, construction labour and other menial jobs – so they do not have enough money for the home. The bits of extra money they make go into drinking and girl friends.' As another woman put it: "Nowadays the men can no longer cope with the burden of looking after us well, so most of us are on our own with our children". As has been shown elsewhere, women's income provides them with psychological and practical leverage in their gender relations. Women, however, may use their often low earnings not so much to increase their power in gender relations but to diminish conflict by asking their husbands for money less often (Kanji 1995: 51-52; Kanji and Jazdowska 1995). Quite a large proportion of women, though recognising positive changes in the status of women, felt that they were not part of this process.

To the extent that the economic crisis and the increasing role of women in informal economic activities have enhanced women's influence in the household, this is being activated by the growing power of women's movements and associations, which are creating a consciousness of the need for greater gender equality. Some men see this growing women's movement as a real threat to their social power at the household level. The following statements by two men interviewed articulate these fears well:

With educated women who have been enlightened by the campaign on the empowerment of women, they think that men have been having the upper hand for far too long and that this is the time to rub shoulders with the men. To me this whole question of empowerment of women is likely to lead us to a situation where women will become men and men become women.

"These days there are many educational programmes on radio and television telling women what their rights are and what they too can do. So there is some change in their attitude in the home. I can say that these educational programmes are doing more harm than good."

Both statements implicitly blame strategic gender conflict on feminism rather than on the men who seek to keep the upper hand. The first statement makes a point upon which radical feminists and conservative anti-feminists actually agree: that existing male and female roles are fundamentally patriarchal. The second statement suggests that challenging these roles does more harm than good. The question is, whose interests are being harmed?

Women saw their increasing power principally as the result of changing economic realities at the household level, even though these might have been enhanced by the growing women in development (WID) activities. In general, as Sister Gloria indicated: "Because women do not depend solely on their husbands for money for food, clothing and health care, they are a bit more vocal and can also take part in decision-making in the family. In fact, in a lot of homes, the men are heads only in name." Such women have often overruled decisions taken by the men without their prior consultation. Other studies have shown that women with independent incomes have a long, slow struggle to increase their power in relation to men, whereas a loss in income often implies a rapid decline in influence because of the loss of "bargaining power" with men over a range of issues affecting themselves and their households (Kanji 1995: 53).

The Growing Incidence of Female Headed Households

Consequent upon these developments and the growing pressures for survival at the household level, one institution which has come under threat is the family itself. Some of the reasons for increasing marital instability and divorce regularly mentioned include the following:

- Economic hardships leading to divorce or male abandonment of his parental responsibility, often also resulting in child labour and abuse,
- The inability of some men to cope with the increasing economic power of wives and the wives' consequent "disrespect" for male authority,
- Growing infidelity and breakdown of the moral fabric of society, itself partly a consequence of poverty, unemployment, and crowding within the home,
- The growing incidence of co-habitation or consensual marriage instead of customary marriage or marriage under the ordinance because of increasing marriage costs, and
- The growing normalcy of poor female headed households.

Fayorsey in her study of 216 Ga women in central Accra found that 26 per cent of all marriages were between couples already living under consensual unions. She presents a graphic picture of the extent of marital instability in this sub-area of the city. Of the total sample of women interviewed only 3 per cent were never married and 58 per cent were married only once. The remaining 39 per cent had been married at least twice (Fayorsey 1992/1993; Fayorsey 1994).

About 73 per cent of the thousand representative households surveyed were male headed, the remaining 27 per cent being headed by women. There is a marked cluster in the indigenous Ga enclaves, where women exhibit a much greater autonomy, and often live separately from their husbands (Aidoo 1985: 22). Between 32 and 45 per cent of all households in the indigenous

communities surveyed were female headed. All other residential sectors had percentage scores well below the average for the city (Songsore and McGranahan 1996: 16; 1998) A decade ago studies showed that households formally headed by women were on the increase in Ghana and constituted about 29 per cent of all households (Lloyd and Brandon 1991: 7).

Having analysed to some extent the power relations within the household, in the next section we discuss the gender division of labour in the management of the home environment.

Layers of Engendered Environmental Niches

Although the internal relations and systems of mutual support are rather complex and unique to individual households in the neighbourhoods and sub-cultures in the Greater Accra Metropolitan Area, there is obvious asymmetry in the roles and responsibilities men and women play within the home. Extending beyond the household, networks of solidarity and other social and economic exchanges also exist between household members, on the one hand, and other extended family members, neighbours and community residents, as well as various community and state institutions. It is important to recognize "that the household is not a closed, autonomous unit or separate sphere" (Varley 1994: 120). Nevertheless, it is important to recognize the importance of the household, and other local-spatial constructs, when discussing both environmental management and disease transmission (Cairncross et al. 1995).

One important aspect of women's subordination is the gender division of labour which gives women overall responsibility for household environmental care, the principal subject of the present analysis. In order to unravel the gender relations in this and neighbouring spheres, it is important to identify the environmental niches at the household and community levels, and how the responsibilities for their management are ordered.

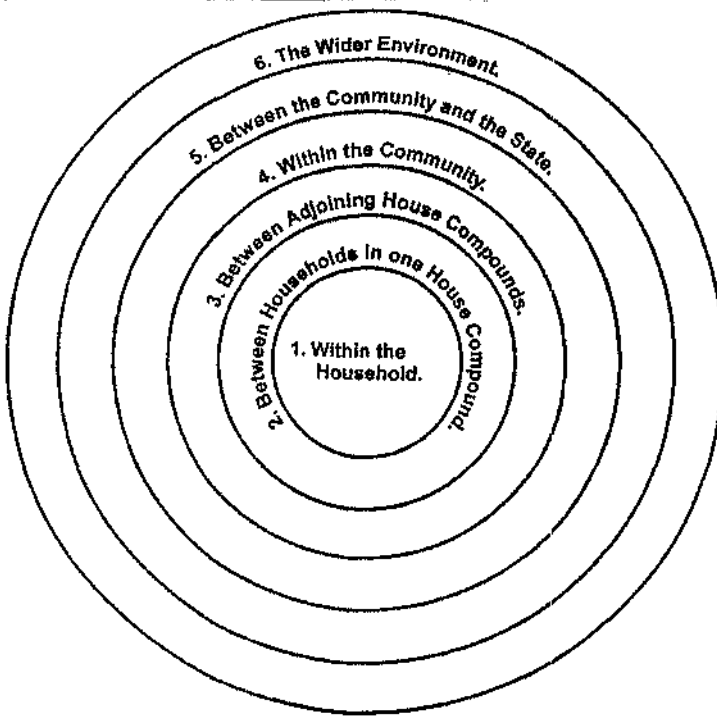
The environmental niches and their management can be conceptualized in terms of a series of overlays of hierarchically arranged layers of engendered environments (Figure 1). Each niche can be defined in terms of the principal social interactions through which environmental management must emerge. The boundaries are, of course, very porous, with the state at times intervening in matters normally resolved within the households, community leaders taking roles traditionally assigned to the state, and so on. Also, it must be kept in mind that one of the most common challenges for environmental management is that the physical and social worlds almost inevitably remain a very imperfect match.

The most basic sphere is within the homes of individual households where some of the most bitter conflicts and struggles of women over their subordination and work burdens are encountered. Much of the discussion of the previous sections focused on this niche.

At the next level, especially within house compounds where the internal architecture is designed for the use of several households (either as extended family members or as a collection of unrelated households in tenement housing units), are the communal areas shared by members of the various households. This niche can include the courtyard, shared kitchen, toilet, bathroom, gate leading out of the house compound and the immediate surroundings of the house-compound, including especially its frontage.

On the peripheries of this niche are the shared and intervening commons between neighbouring house-compounds in closely built-up areas, which need to be managed as a different sphere. This includes areas where formal responsibilities are often very poorly defined, but effective management typically will require arrangements between adjoining compounds.

Figure 1:
Layers of engendered environmental niches: household, community and state in Ghana



The fourth tier consists of community sites, such as public toilets and waste-collection points, where an overlay of the wider community environment and community regulations impinge on specific household members with specific responsibilities for managing specific niches.

The next overlay, which at least formally superordinates all the other tiers mentioned, is where the environmental management decisions emerge through the executive and regulatory framework of state environmental management institutions on city-wide and national levels.

Finally, there is a wider environment which refers to external influences and processes which are largely beyond the control of the state or any of the other relevant actors.

It is the particular combination of elements from all these layers which give communities and neighbourhoods their character. The evidence presented below suggests a waning influence of women as one moves from the inner to the outer layers of decision-making and environmental management within the city. But how are environmental caring roles carried out in reality within these niches and by whom?

Women's environmental caring roles

Most people asked were apt to stress that women as principal homemakers do practically every household task, very much like the proverbial "hewers of wood and drawers of water," to satisfy men's needs and the needs of the household. In most low income communities, female children are normally by their mother's sides, assisting them in their household work from about age seven onwards. Their

assignments, depending on their age, tend to include washing utensils, participation in meal preparation, sweeping and washing of clothes. They also go on short trips to the market to buy needed items while others do petty selling to help generate some income for the family's sustenance. Child labour, especially for girls, was very common in most low income areas, as children did petty trade before and after school hours. The mother's burden can easily become a young daughter's, a sacrifice rarely demanded of boys. School drop out rates tended to be high in these communities, again especially for the girls.

Even male children are sometimes pressed into petty selling. Additionally, they do such chores as fetching water, dumping garbage and running errands. Boys were considered a second-best choice among the interviewed households, and rarely did such work except in households with no female children. In most cases, boys, like adult males, were out of the house and thought to be "playing", older male children were especially likely to be out and about. As the saying goes, "like father like son". Indeed in every community visited, male children could be seen playing football whilst their female siblings were indoors taking care of younger siblings or doing one chore or the other for the principal female homemaker.

For ease of analysis, women's environmental caring roles within the home are discussed under the following:

1. managing the household environment and cooking in the limited sense;
2. childcare, care for the elderly and general healthcare; and
3. managing communal areas in house compounds and neighbourhood.

Managing the Household Environment

The principal environmental management tasks normally performed by women include cleaning the home, toilets and bathrooms; washing clothes; fetching water and buying or fetching domestic fuel for cooking; going to purchase food items and other household needs from the market; cooking food, serving meals and cleaning the dishes. In all these activities they may be exposed to serious environmental health risks. Not all environmental caring roles are necessarily undertaken by the principal female homemakers. As revealed by in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, a complex division of labour often exists between wife and husband, wife and especially female children, wife and house maid or foster-child, wife and mother-in-law or sister-in-law etc. These vary according to the household composition, stage in the demographic cycle, wealth, type of employment of adults and whether the principal female homemaker is also the principal "breadwinner". This variation notwithstanding, women generally take their role as carers for the home environment and as wives and mothers most seriously.

The social norm is for women to do the unpaid physical work and the men to pay the bills – rent, electricity bills, water bills, and toilet charges – and provide money for the upkeep of the family, which in local parlance is called the "chop money". Men may undertake, in addition, such occasional tasks as setting traps for mice, killing dangerous reptiles such as snakes that may stray into the home, protecting the household from neighbourhood violence and undertaking minor repairs to the building or the room. While it is becoming the general practice for women to help pay the bills on behalf of impecunious male heads of household, very few men help in performing the routine household chores on behalf of overworked women.

There are ideological and cultural barriers keeping men apart from these activities. The rather derogatory term "kotobonku" is the label given to men who undertake household chores. In the past, refusal by the wife to wash a man's clothes was sufficient reason for a divorce. Most married men, and perhaps especially those from low income households who could not afford the services of maids or cooks, considered it derogatory to scrub bathrooms or wash cooking utensils. Even unemployed men may consider it beyond their dignity to help their wives with household chores. Some men do not even

have the elementary courtesy of picking up the bucket from the bathroom after they have washed with water carried to the bathroom by women. This prevailing attitude would appear to be strongest among the poorer uneducated men, although it is in such households that the environmental management burdens for the women are particularly acute.

Caring for Children, the Elderly and the Ill of the Household

For those women who are principally homemakers with infants and children, caring for the home also includes feeding, bathing and clothing the child. It is the mother who has to keep close watch over the children, monitoring their health state, worrying when children fall sick and taking them both to health care providers and to school. The mother, together with the grandmother and female siblings, is the child's entertainer, playmate, educator and socialiser. All these activities entail a heavy demand on the woman's labour time and often stand in conflict with other domestic tasks and income generating activities. As in most cultures, "the idealization of the institution of motherhood as all-powerful, strong and caring brings with it the implication that mothers alone have full responsibility for child-bearing and all the related household caring and domestic work" (O'Connell 1994: 37)

The household head is traditionally responsible for taking care of the household in general. Therefore he/she is responsible for sick people in the home. Male heads of household may exercise this leadership by deciding on the type of health care institution to visit or the form of treatment such sick people should have, as they are normally those who pay the bills. Women in their turn physically nurse sick children and adults (especially elderly people) whilst increasingly they also contribute towards paying the health bills of members in most low income households.

As one woman remarked, "It is the woman who takes care of the sick man, and the man too takes care of his sick wife. There are some men who do not bother about their sick wives. Women cannot do the same. They are always full of pity for their husbands." There was a pregnant woman whose husband gave her 15,000 cedis (USD2.5) a month for the upkeep of the home. He added no extra money for medical treatment, drugs, or other pregnancy related expenses. Life for her was a daily struggle.

On account of their role as carers within the home, women are not only exposed to communicable diseases when other household members become ill, but often feel the weight of their responsibilities very heavily, adding to an already stressful life.

Managing Communal Areas in House Compounds and Neighbourhoods

In low income neighbourhoods where the majority of the city's population is found, the most popular dwelling type is the single-storey traditional compound house. This is normally occupied by several nuclear households, either as a collection of extended family members or as a group of individual tenants who do not have any kin and who often come from different backgrounds. Over the years, a nexus of informal arrangements has developed for managing communal areas and facilities within the house compound and in the neighbourhood. It is this internal architecture of house compounds more than kinship networks that determines to a large extent institutional arrangements for managing shared facilities and spaces. These include the courtyard in the compound house and the immediate surroundings, the in-house shared toilet, kitchen, and bathroom. It also includes mechanisms for sharing out electricity bills and water bills among all members who share the same meter.

A gender division of labour is evident, as women play a critical role in maintaining good hygiene and sanitation within these communal areas. Women are responsible for cleaning shared kitchens, bathrooms, courtyards, toilets and the immediate environs of the house. Arrangements for joint

management are often negotiated between the principal female homemakers from each household within the house compound. Among many tenant households a fairly rigid roster is prepared, indicating days or times during which each female principal homemaker is on call for keeping the commons clean. Similar arrangements are found where nuclear households belonging to one extended family live in a family house compound, although these are sometimes more informal and voluntary in nature.

Each house compound has its rules of hygiene practice laid down by the landlord or his caretaker, who is often an old trusted tenant, for rental units. In the case of family house compounds these are often laid down by the head of family, who in most cases is not a woman, although the implementation is carried out by women. Bachelors who do not have female dependants are exempted from these feminine duties. Rules can be very rigid where resident landlords or landladies share the house compound with tenants. In one such case the following rules were laid down and they were to be observed by all tenants. Persistent violation could cause the eviction of the tenant:

- women are responsible for managing the communal areas,
- noisy quarrels between tenants are not allowed,
- the courtyard has to be kept clean,
- no loud music is permitted,
- no domestic animals are to be kept,
- too many visitors are not allowed for any household, and
- by 11 pm the main gate leading from the house compound to the outside is locked. Any person expecting to be late in arriving home has to make arrangements with the sons of the landlord to open the gate after that hour.

In the very crowded house compounds in Jamestown, where the open courtyards have been reduced to mere passageways through infilling with the construction of wooden shacks to serve as additional accommodation for family members, the codified rules of hygiene behaviour for every house compound also included the following:

- no spitting is allowed on the ground
- no defecation on the ground by children is allowed except in chamber pots, and
- no urination on the walls is permitted.

Although these norms exist in neighbourhoods where non-communal houses and less crowded communal house compounds prevail, they are less rigorously enforced, since every household has at least a small private area in front of the room in the courtyard where household activities such as cooking take place. Very often, the level of enforcement depends on the knowledge of good hygiene behaviour and the degree of co-operation among householders. As a general rule men only come into the picture intermittently. When there is the need, men may weed around the compound or desilt gutters. They help resolve conflicts between households due to misunderstandings between children or women.

Elaborate arrangements also exist in individual house compounds for settling electricity bills among individual householders using a shared meter. The bulk electricity bill is shared out using what in most areas is called the "point system". A point is defined as an output flow that a household uses e.g. points are awarded for bulbs, refrigerators, fans, electric irons, heaters, television sets etc. A weighted system is employed whereby electric appliances such as irons, heaters and stoves are given 2 to 3 points each as the case may be. On a few occasions the rate is the same for all households, or based on household size. Owners of the meters, often resident landlords, are in the habit of shifting much of the cost of electricity consumption to other householders.

Similar arrangements exist for sharing water bills from an in-house standpipe. In most cases the owner charges co-residents monthly fees or else they pay by the bucket.

Although there is no specific legislation targeting women, very often it is the woman responsible for the day's house compound chores who is held accountable when sanitary inspectors come around. Where fines are levied for dirty surroundings, these may be paid by the specific household on duty or all the resident households contribute to pay the fine. This depends on the negotiated arrangements in the particular house compound. Many environmental externalities exist (e.g. noise pollution, smoke pollution, effluent pollution, smell nuisance and flies) and are the cause of inter-household tension despite the informal arrangements.

Where pan latrines exist in house compounds, women are only responsible for their cleaning, leaving the responsibility of daily or weekly removal of the human excreta to a hired conservancy labourer, invariably male. If he defaults, it is the men in the house compound who have to dispose of the waste at a sanitary site (or household members resort to a public latrine until the contents are emptied by the hired conservancy labourer).

The more difficult areas to manage are the environmental niches between house compounds and the commons within the neighbourhood. This is because of the widespread practice of illegal waste dumping and open defecation or the disposal of black polythene bags filled with human excreta. This often happens under cover of darkness. For example, in some parts of Nima people have to wake up at 3 am to visit the community KVIP in order to avoid over an hour long wait in the toilet queue in the morning. It is such long queues and pressures to answer nature's call, together with the odour nuisance of these facilities, that often compel these desperate actions in deprived communities.

At the community or neighbourhood level, institutions of the metropolitan authority or the CBO assume management of the community-wide facilities where they exist. Men are usually engaged and paid from the charges levied on households. Women and children do carry garbage to the waste dumping sites or containers and like everyone else use the public toilets. Women's influence drops sharply at this point as formal institutions manned by men begin to assert themselves. Women in general were less aware of neighbourhood by-laws than those set at the household and house compound levels. Some recalled by-laws concerning unauthorized waste dumping, open defecation and the need for good sanitation around the house. They were less conscious of the responsibilities and duties that the metropolitan authorities and utility agencies had in their communities for the delivery and maintenance of services. Perhaps as a result of the poor representation of women at these higher policy making levels, they are unable to shape policy in response to both their practical and strategic gender needs with regard to environmental management at the household level.

Azala-A Girl Porter or *Kaya Yoo*

This brief account of Azala provides the last section of this appraisal. In discussing women's environmental problems, it is important not to lose sight of the socio-economic dimensions of the common problems which both women and men face. The following account of a young female porter, or *kaya yoo*, is a woman's story, gathered in the course of this study. But it is also a story of economic hardship transcending the gender divide. There is an enormous gap between the environmental health and management problems Azala faces, and those which impinge on wealthier women whose homes are secure and well serviced. A somewhat similar story could be constructed, however, for many young boys working in the informal sector.

It was a hot and steamy Saturday afternoon. Flies were buzzing around the group of girls sitting on their large carrying pans in front of the Electricity Sub-Station office near Makola Market in the heart of Accra's Central Business District. Some of the girls were conversing while others were asleep. Two were picking lice from the hair of a smaller girl. The conversation stopped when the girls noticed some strangers approaching. Understandably, the girls looked suspicious and skeptical. These were children ranging from about ten to seventeen years who for one reason or the other were not in school. Some were found here through their own truancy, others were forced to be there through circumstances beyond their comprehension and control.

One of these girls was Azala. She is twelve, and left school several years ago, when she was in class 2. Coming from a poor home, she says she was enticed to Accra by the lovely items her relatives brought to their hometown (Tamale) from the metropolis. According to Azala, she had to plead hard and cry herself to sleep before she was allowed by her illiterate parents to come to Accra with her aunt, who is a *kaya yoo* living in a shack in the squatter settlement behind the Timber Market in Accra.

Azala is now a *kaya yoo* herself, and wakes up around 6 am. She sweeps the yard with the help of other girls in the house. She takes her bath and eats some koko (i.e. porridge) bought nearby. By 8 or 9am she arrives at Makola Market. Work commences with a characteristic struggle with other girls for clients' wares. For lunch, she buys kenkey and fish from street food vendors. Often, she comes back home around 6-6.30pm. She then bathes, buys her supper from vendors, eats and goes to sleep. On Sundays, which are off-duty days, she washes her clothes, braids her hair and sometimes visits friends and watches television.

Azala complains that city guards and some clients harass the *kaya yoo* at the market. The former chase them around for not registering with the Accra Metropolitan Authority (AMA). The latter pour insults on them and sometimes underpay them.

For her accommodation, she shares a one-room wooden shack with eight other *kaya yoo*s. They each contribute 300 cedis a week as rent for the room. The house is covered with polythene as roofing material and leaks a lot when it rains. "When it rains, we have to roll our mats and stand upright, covering ourselves with big polythene bags", she said. She pays 50 cedis for the use of a public bathhouse including a bucket of water provided by the water vendor, who also runs the bathhouse which is capable of taking 10 women at a time in the female compartment. The bathhouse consists of a walled open space with a cemented floor. She also pays 30 cedis per use for a public toilet facility. "These public facilities are dirty and inconvenient", she complained. She confessed she sometimes wakes up very early to defecate on the garbage dump. If caught she would have to pay a fine of 5,000 cedis.

She and the other *kaya yoo*s regularly buy cooked food from vendors. They have no pots, pans, coal pots and other facilities for cooking, which at least spares them the smoke hazards. "Besides, it is cheaper and time saving to buy cooked food rather than to cook it yourself", Azala claimed.

She sometimes suffers from malaria, headache and skin rashes. Her aunt gives her medicine bought from chemist shops or itinerant drugs peddlers. She recollects attending Korle-Bu Hospital only once. This was when she became literally paralysed with malaria. "Hospital fees are too high. So we buy our own medicines," she said.

Azala, nevertheless, looked quite healthy and strong at the time of the interview. Her clothes, however, had a dirty appearance and her hair was a bit untidy. The place she was found taking a breather was also very dirty.

The foregoing sections given some insights into the politics and structural context of women's household environmental caring roles. The results do demonstrate that the principal adult women of the households, on account of their managerial role, bear an inordinate share of the environmental health burden within the domestic sphere. A household's wealth (or indirectly its class position) plays an important mediating role in determining the constellation of environmental hazards faced by the principal woman homemaker of a household. However, several of the more serious environmental hazards, ranging from exposure to smoke from cooking fires, to pesticides from home spraying, and to cross infection from the children, are clearly linked to the gender division of labour (Songsore and McGranahan 1996; 1999). A companion study in Jakarta has also shown that a significant share of women's respiratory illnesses is contracted from their children, as was the case for Accra (Surjadi 1993: 82). Among children, a gender division of labour asserts itself fairly early.

However, the results suggest that for children under six, the environmental correlates of poverty pose obvious health risks, but their severity bears no clear relation to the sex of the child, according to the monitored diarrhoeal and acute respiratory problem results from the quantitative part of the larger study (Songsore and McGranahan 1994; 1996; 1998). While age helps determine which health problems are most severe for both men and women (Stephens et al. 1994), the age trajectory of environmental hazards is gender dependent.

Conclusion

Environmental problems in and around the home are a particularly serious health burden for the women and children of the Greater Accra Metropolitan area. Poverty greatly exacerbates this burden among children. On the other hand, the tasks that many women face in managing the home environment are far more onerous in conditions of poverty, even as the need to devote time to income earning activities is greater. Household environmental management not only involves more difficult and hazardous work in poor neighbourhoods, but is more likely to require co-operation among households. Moreover, when men are unable to meet their traditional economic obligations, they resent it when women become the principal income earners, but are not inclined to take on traditionally female obligations.

Household and neighbourhood level environmental problems do not receive the attention they deserve in environmental debates, and this probably reflects, at least in part, a form of gender discrimination: once the water has left the tap, the fuels have been purchased, and more generally the environmental problems have entered the home, they are considered less important "women's problems." From the perspective of the women, and particularly the low-income women, improvements in environmental services almost certainly deserve more support. On the other hand, simply increasing the level of government intervention is unlikely to be the most effective means of assisting these women.

This study suggests that the future of environmental management in the homes and neighborhoods of the Greater Accra metropolitan area will be determined in part by external development: 1) changes in formal government policies on environmental services and regulation; 2) economic changes which affect the circumstances of the poor majority; 3) changes in relations between the genders. All of these processes have global as well as local dimensions, and are closely interrelated. Many of the recent shifts in government policy affecting local environmental management reflect adherence to a structural

adjustment programme (SAP) promoted internationally in support of global capitalism (Songsore and McGranahan, forthcoming). The economic prospects for the poor majority also depend critically upon the global political economy.

The principal focus of this study has been on the role of women in environmental management in and around the home. Despite the local focus, the importance of large scale and even global processes is even evident here. The economic setbacks which have affected large parts of Africa in recent decades have had repercussions on household relations in the Greater Accra metropolitan area, as have the structural adjustment policies Ghana has had to adopt. Indirectly, international economic processes and economic ideologies have played an important role in shaping the development of gender relations locally. More directly, the international women's movement has changed the meaning of women's daily struggles to improve their position.

While many men are feeling threatened by women's empowerment, the actual gains women have made have been minimal. There still exists a critical disjuncture between those who manage the household environment and those who take strategic decisions in terms of allocation of resources to support environmental improvement, are principally male household heads and male policy makers within the state bureaucracy and *not* women. Those who bear the burden of environmental management within the home are almost exclusively women. Compounding the difficulties which may arise due to the dominance of men and male perspectives within government, is the related problem that formal state regulations are ill suited to many of the local environmental management problems women face.

Like many problems women have in relation to men, the environmental problems of the home are complicated by the "intimacy" of the social relations involved. If a factory pollutes the air, and damages the health and well being of local residents, governments around the world recognise this as a public nuisance, and accept the need for regulating the factory owners. If workers are adversely affected, most governments also accept the need to regulate their employers. But within the household, the legitimacy of government intervention is more problematic, and it is easy to end up blaming the principal victims.

Is a male household head responsible for the smoke which his spouse is exposed to while cooking, if he is the one who purchases the stove? Or, is a female homemaker responsible for the poor sanitary conditions which put all household members, and even neighbours, at risk? Historically, the later view has been more evident than the former. During Accra's colonial period, for example, there were times when the work of the lower courts was dominated by cases of women accused of sanitary offences (Robertson 1993). Hopefully, such an approach would no longer be considered acceptable. However, alternative strategies, through which the government could actively support women to improve their environmental position in relation to men, are not evident. Moreover, it is all too easy to imagine, for example, an anti-smoke campaign, warning women not to expose themselves to smoke from cooking fires and smokers not to smoke cigarettes, as if the two problems are comparable: as if women were actively choosing to cook with smoky fuels in the same manner people choose to smoke cigarettes.

The women in the Greater Accra metropolitan area did not seem to think the government had a major role to play in dealing with, for example, indoor air pollution. Only 15% of the almost 1,000 women respondents felt that the government needed to take the lead in improving indoor air, as compared to 78% for water, 61% for solid waste, 56% for outdoor air, 44% for insects, and 42% for sanitation. The areas where government action was popular were precisely those areas where the government can act without becoming involved in household affairs. Yet at the same time, more than half of these same women felt that improvements in indoor air quality did need to be initiated at the household level (Songsore and McGranahan 1996: 30-31).

Serious attempts to improve conditions for these women, and indirectly for the majority of Accra's citizens, will have to work with them. It is not simply a question of providing advice on how to improve home environments, and the opportunity to purchase household level environmental services at cost. Improvements should come with better economic conditions, and improved services, but also through changes in gender relations to the advantage of women. In some cases this may involve increasing their status or easing the burden of women's roles, while in others it may involve challenging existing roles. But in all cases it will involve significant changes in relations of power.

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