

## RESEARCH REPORT

### INVISIBLE WOMEN

LUCY BONNERJEA

*Centre for Applied Social Sciences, University of Zimbabwe*

IN THE PAST, there were few statistics collected on the female populations of various countries. This paper traces the historical neglect of women and the more modern interest in them, confined at first to questions relating to fertility and later to welfare considerations, and then raises questions about the consequences for policy-making today.

'Statistics' is a term generally used for the results of an enumeration, or, more technically, for the science of drawing inferences from numerical data. Perhaps the earliest forms of statistics were the cadastral surveys of ancient Babylonia, China and Egypt, which had quite elaborate accounting systems, recording numbers of soldiers, and supplies of gold and silver, and of corn; women, however, were never seen as resources to be counted. Systematic censuses were first carried out by Roman magistrates, in order to make a register of the people and their property, at five-year intervals. The concern was with men only, and the aim was to identify who should be taxed, inducted into military service, or forced to work. Information was not needed on women.

Today the population census has evolved to become the most comprehensive single source of information about a nation. It not only reveals basic demographic trends such as the changing composition of a population, but also shows trends in urbanization, changes in occupational and industrial configuration and in standards of living, levels of education and employment, and regional and group differentiation. It also makes possible estimates of future trends, which are essential in all kinds of planning.

Information is now collected on women, too. Statistical techniques have been refined enormously since, for example, the first census in Great Britain in 1801, yet many of the concepts and assumptions relating to family life and to women remain the same, although it is in this area in particular that these concepts have become most inappropriate.

### CONCEPTS

Western criticisms of the census and of other data-collecting measures have focused on a number of concepts. In Britain, Oakley and Oakley<sup>1</sup> have pointed to an inherent contradiction in the census which is conceived as a household survey yet attempts to identify the socio-demographic characteristics not only of households but also of individuals. This has led to a tendency to assume that the household is an entity in

<sup>1</sup>A. Oakley and R. Oakley, 'Sexism in official statistics', in J. Irvine, I. Miles and J. Evans (eds), *Demystifying Social Statistics* (London: Pluto Press, 1979), 172-90.

itself, and to forget that it is made up of individuals with different characteristics, each with different needs, opportunities and constraints.

The link between the household and the individual has been the 'head of household', a concept based on a number of debatable assumptions: that the head is male, and that he has various dependants, among whom is his wife. Even if this was ever an accurate description of a household, nowadays being head and being responsible for the home are two functions which are increasingly shared between spouses—and this seems to be happening in different cultures and different social classes. Where responsibilities are shared, 'head of household' becomes an inappropriate term; it conceals the position of women in both family and society.

The third concept which needs re-thinking is the category of 'economically active'. This is a peculiar category: being a housewife is not 'working'; being on strike is; the care of elderly persons is classified as work or not, depending on whether it is paid.<sup>2</sup> Being away from work because of sickness, holiday and unemployment does not prevent one from being economically active, while looking after children—unless they are not your own, and someone pays you—is being economically inactive. This concept was designed to fit the male industrial patterns of continuous, full-time employment; it has little regard for women's patterns of work or their contribution to the home, community and society.

A fourth concept criticized in the West is that of social-class categorization—an attempt to sum up various factors about a person, perhaps best described as 'life chances'—and the way it is derived. Traditionally, occupation has been used as the best single indicator for identifying social class. While this may be appropriate for men, in the case of women it is not. Men's occupations say nothing about women. And women's occupations do not relate clearly to their education and training, or to other aspects of their lives such as housing, earnings and life-styles. For a variety of structural reasons, women are confined to a narrow range of occupations and as a result working women tend to be concentrated in one social-class category: 'social class III non-manual'.<sup>3</sup> This category, however, subsumes such a variety of occupations and lifestyles that once again one can gain from it little information about the women so classed.

In summary, there are numerous problems in these concepts as used to collect information on women. They have been taken from a different context and not adapted. The fact that these concepts are largely irrelevant to women shows that men and women do occupy different positions in relation to society's opportunities and rewards. At the same time, however, these concepts are unable to show that 'different' is also 'unequal'. At best, they result in a partial understanding of the roles that women play in society and family, and at worst, in a mystifying process that upholds past traditional values and norms and conceals the very change that the data are trying to illustrate and quantify.

## EXPORTING CONCEPTS

The idea of a census, together with the aims and assumptions inherent in it, were

<sup>2</sup>M. Nissel and L. Bonnerjea, 'Looking after the Handicapped Elderly at Home: Who Pays?' (London, Policy Studies Institute Working Paper, Report 602, 1981).

<sup>3</sup>M. Nissel, *Basic Concepts and Assumptions: Women in Government Statistics* (Manchester, Equal Opportunities Commission, Research Bulletin 4, 1980).

exported with the rest of the colonial administration to the Third World. The colonial powers oversaw the transformation of most African countries into economically dependent areas.<sup>4</sup> The earliest measures of enumeration were in the collection of taxes, the registration of males, and the control of livestock, as African areas were drawn into the cash economy and into new patterns of production.

In Zimbabwe this process started early. In Mashonaland the British South Africa Company in 1894 imposed a hut tax (Ordinance No. 5 of 1894) of 10s. per hut, irrespective of the number of people living in it. Ten years later the Native Tax Ordinance (No. 12 of 1904) replaced the hut tax with a poll tax of £1 on each male over the age of sixteen. This not only meant a doubling of the amount payable, but, in the change from hut to men, also resulted in the expansion of the revenue base. Women did not pay tax, although a man having more than one wife paid an extra 10s.

In this way, women were not counted unless they were part of a polygynous household. Then, in the first decade of this century, there was an attempt to estimate the whole Black population of the country. The method did not involve counting individuals— it simply used a multiplying factor of 3.5 times the total number of indigenous taxpayers. The tax on polygynists was dropped at this time.<sup>5</sup> Women disappeared altogether from the figures.

It was only after the Second World War that the Central African Statistical Office in Salisbury started investigations into the size of the Black population; in 1948 a sample survey which was carried out used as a frame a list of taxed villages, and the selected sample villages had their total population counted. This was in contrast to the 1936 and 1946 censuses, which are divided into three main sections, European, Asian and Coloured, following which there is some information on 'Natives', accompanied by an explanatory note that reads:

The schedule for 'Natives in Employment' (which the employer was required to complete) differed entirely from the other three, because the socially useful information obtainable in regard to native wage-earners was inevitably of a different [nature] from that of the more civilised races.<sup>6</sup>

This comment indicates something of the nature of race relations at the time, but here it is used simply to show the similarity in attitude between what is considered 'socially useful' information on Whites and Blacks, and men and women. If there was little information on Blacks, there was even less on Black women; and these are two problems, not one.

Change was introduced only slowly. The 1951 census of employers covered all races and the term 'Native' was changed to 'African'. The 1969 census, the latest one available, still made racial and sexual distinctions in the quantity and

<sup>4</sup> W. Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London, Bogle L'Ouverture, 1972).

<sup>5</sup> R.W.M. Johnson, 'African population estimates: Myth or reality?', *Rhodesian Journal of Economics* (1969), III, 5-17.

<sup>6</sup> Southern Rhodesia, *Report of the Director of Census on the Census of Population, 1936*, ([Salisbury, Department of Statistics], mimeo, 1943), 4; *Report on the Census of Population of Southern Rhodesia Held on 7th May, 1946* ([Salisbury, Central African Statistical Office], 1949), 2.

nature of the information collected: it used a detailed questionnaire relating to persons other than 'the African', and a condensed form for the Black population.<sup>7</sup>

### THE 1969 CENSUS

How did women feature in Zimbabwe's last census? Firstly, there is an emphasis on portraying Black women as the bearers of children, and the census gives no comparable figures or comments on women of the other races. The concern with women is immediately apparent in the large section on the 'Fertility and Mortality of the African Population'. There are figures on all children born and on surviving children, age-specific fertility data, and urban - rural comparisons of fertility. For the last mentioned, the fact that the number of children born to urban females is below that for rural women of the same age receives more comment than does the correspondingly higher survival ratio of the urban children. There are Tables relating education to fertility, and the section ends on an 'overall natural increase' estimate. The concern with women seems to be based on an interest in demography generally and perhaps overpopulation in particular.

Other sections have much less information. In the housing data, three out of nineteen Tables are concerned with Africans, and there is no information on, for example, female-headed households, or on rents paid or income earned by women. There is information on electricity supplies but not on water, which is particularly important in identifying living standards of families and the nature of 'housework' for the women. The education section is a little more comprehensive, with male/female subdivisions for both attendance and standards attained.

There are eight Tables concerned with the 'economically active' African population. The earlier criticisms of the concept are relevant here. The Table on the 'Employment Status of Africans by Year of Birth and Sex' is reproduced here in aggregated form as Table I, in an attempt to show the irrelevance of the concept, the data, and the whole Table, to women's work. There are 1,227,650 women who are of 15 years and above. Of these, 101,130 are described as 'economically active', while 1,116,520 are not. So fewer than one in ten are even potentially describable. However, when one subdivides the 101,130 even further, 3,960 are actively seeking work, and 89,660 are employees of 'others'. So of 1,227,650 women, the work of only 7,510 can be identified (in the first three columns). This is hardly illuminating of the economic activities of Black women.

The only other Table in the census which sheds any light on the formal employment of Black women is Table 77, entitled 'African Employees by Industry, Sector and Sex', which compares the private and the public sector for men and women. The figures seem very low; for example, there are only 32,524 women involved in agriculture and livestock production, in contrast to 212,955 men. However, the Table does still show where the women are concentrated: in the service sector. This is still a small number compared to the number of men: 24,673 to 153,340. Of the 24,673 women, 16,474 were in the domestic sector while only 20 were in the business services and 48 in the recreational and cultural services. No figures are available on earnings. This Table seems mainly to show

<sup>7</sup> Southern Rhodesia, *Census of Population, 1951* ([Salisbury, Central African Statistical Office], 1954); Rhodesia, *Census of Population 1969* (Salisbury, Central Statistical Office, [1971]).

Table I  
 COMPONENTS OF THE ECONOMICALLY ACTIVE POPULATION ENUMERATED IN THE  
 1969 AFRICAN HOUSEHOLD CENSUS

Sex and Age Group	Self-Employed outside Agri-culture	Employees of:			Total Enumerated Economic-ally Active	All Other Persons	Not Stated	Total Population
		African Farmers	African Business-men	Others				
<b>Males:</b>								
Under 15 years	310	2 940	940	17 100	20 980	1 115 300	9 930	1 147 490
15 years and over	15 490	10 090	11 450	606 030	627 570	597 650	6 070	1 271 390
Not stated	180	100	150	9 940	10 190	7 070	3 570	21 300
TOTAL	15 980	13 130	12 540	633 070	658 740	1 720 020	19 570	2 440 180
<b>Females:</b>								
Under 15 years	320	900	790	9 580	11 270	1 139 550	10 370	1 161 880
15 years and over	2 600	1 330	3 580	89 660	94 570	1 116 520	10 000	1 227 650
Not stated	20	—	—	1 370	1 370	13 190	2 510	17 220
TOTAL	2 940	2 230	4 370	100 610	107 210	2 269 260	22 880	2 406 750
<b>Persons:</b>								
Under 15 years	630	3 840	1 730	26 680	32 250	2 254 850	20 300	2 309 370
15 years and over	18 090	11 420	15 030	695 690	722 140	1 714 170	16 070	2 499 040
Not stated	200	100	150	11 310	11 560	20 260	6 080	38 250
TOTAL	18 920	15 360	16 910	733 680	765 950	3 989 280	42 450	4 846 930

Source: Rhodesia, Census of Population 1969, Table T5 (adapted).

Table II  
LESOTHO: VALUE OF LABOUR PERFORMED BY WOMEN

Sectors	Industrial Origin of G.D.P. (at factor cost) (Millions of Rands)	Percentage of G.D.P. Attributable to Labour Factors	Value of Labour Factors (Millions of Rands)	Percentage of Female Workers per Branch	Total Value of Female Labour (Millions of Rands)	Equivalent in Millions of Rands
Agriculture	1967	16.82	14.30		12.15	
	1971	20.06	17.05	85	14.50	
	1975	29.22	24.85		21.10	
Mining	1967	1.02	0.77		0.02	
	1971	0.22	0.17	75	—	
	1975	0.31	0.24	2	0.01	
Manufacturing	1967	0.24	0.15		0.04	
	1971	0.75	0.45	60	0.11	
	1975	1.86	1.12	25	0.28	
Electricity-water	1967	0.11	0.01		—	
	1971	0.19	0.02	10	—	
	1975	0.96	0.10		—	
Construction	1967	0.90	0.67		0.03	
	1971	1.26	0.96	75	0.05	
	1975	2.64	1.98	5	0.10	
Commerce	1967	12.11	3.02		0.60	
	1971	15.31	3.83	25	0.76	
	1975	24.38	6.09	20	1.22	
TOTAL	1967	31.20	18.92	60.6	12.84	17.2
	1971	37.79	22.48	59.5	15.42	21.4
	1975	59.37	34.48	57.9	22.71	26.1

Source: United Nations Yearbook, 1975.

what kind of work women do not do. It does not even touch on the wide range of informal and self-employed activities in which they are often involved.

### OTHER STUDIES

The 1969 census does not provide much useful information on Black women, partly because of the application of inappropriate concepts, which leads to the asking of irrelevant questions, and partly because of lack of interest. But the census is only one form of data collection. Others (surveys or evaluations of programmes, for instance) tend to use similar assumptions and conceptualizations. This frequently leads to misconceptions about changes in society and about the effects of specific programmes.

Cost-benefit analysis is a statistical technique that is being used increasingly in evaluation studies, but its application is often based on a misconception about the labour importance of women.<sup>8</sup> For it favours certain sectors of the community: the cash-earning individuals who have high 'opportunity costs'. This involves a higher valuation of the middle classes, and men become more important than women. One example is the benefit of measuring health programmes in terms of increases in Gross National Product (G.N.P.), which results from earlier returns to employment.<sup>9</sup> This disregards women's health, since much of women's work is not 'formal' employment, and hence is not thought to count in the estimate.

The G.N.P. itself has become a contentious issue. The calculations on which it is based completely ignore subsistence food agriculture, which largely accounts for rural women's work. The concept of G.N.P. is based on the Keynesian approach to output, on materially valued, not simply valuable, output. However, this method of presenting a country's accounts hides all distributional effects and shows little information on standards of living or welfare. Class inequality, racial inequality, rural poverty and sex differences can all be hidden. This is particularly relevant to a country like Zimbabwe, which is built on a dual economy on two levels; both the racial and the sexual differences in opportunities are enormous. Zimbabwe's G.N.P. can rise steadily while for the majority of the population there is no change.

### ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

There are examples of meaningful collations and analyses of data. The U.N.D.P., for instance, put together 1976 income figures for Africa. The average income for all of Africa was US\$400 per capita, while the average income for Zimbabwe was US\$500 per capita. The inequality of distribution within Zimbabwe can best be illustrated with further comparisons: the average per capita European income was nearly US\$8,000, while the African average income was US\$150. The approximate average for the Tribal Trust Lands was US\$40.<sup>10</sup>

Meaningful national data on women are more difficult to find. For Zimbabwe, data have largely been confined to the census with its narrow focus. The monthly

<sup>8</sup>B. Rodgers, *The Domestication of Women* (London, Tavistock, 1980).

<sup>9</sup>D.W. Pearce, *Cost Benefit Analysis* (London, Macmillan, 1973).

<sup>10</sup>U.N.D.P., *Zimbabwe: Towards a New Order. An Economic and Social Survey* (Geneva, U.N.C.T.A.D., 1980).

statistics collected by the Central Statistical Office do not have any data on women. Other countries are beginning to recognize their contribution. In Lesotho, for example, there has been an attempt to measure women's contribution to the G.N.P. This is presented in Table II, in which the productive sector is broken into six categories, the origins of G.N.P. at factor cost being shown in the national currency. The G.N.P. value that can be attributed to labour factors is estimated, after the extraction of capital inputs and land values. The labour is then valued and the percentage contributed by women gives the estimated monetary value of the labour.<sup>11</sup>

The figure is high because much of Lesotho's labour force is not employed inside the country. Nevertheless, it is an example of how the monetary value of women's work, and their contribution to the economy, can be measured, and also of how the participation of women in economic activities in the rural areas, as opposed to the wage-employment sector, can be quantified. This is important for Zimbabwe, since the splitting of families between the urban and rural settings is an issue that is being considered by policy-makers at the present; it is of concern to both the Riddell Commission and the Ministry of Lands drawing up plans for the resettlement programme. Data quantifying the economic and social effects of this separation are badly needed before decisions are taken.

## INDICATORS

In order to avoid having to make crude estimates, it is important to develop and collect a systematic set of indicators which can be used to illustrate the economic and social position of women, and to enable comparisons to be made between different countries and within a country between regions and over time. These measures need to be more refined than those currently available, and they also need to include measures of the effects of any development process. Various indicators have been suggested in relation to the progress of whole societies; here, however, the concern is with the comparative access of men and women to the benefits and costs of development.

One set of simple measurements has been suggested by the African Training and Research Centre for Women, part of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa based in Addis Ababa.<sup>12</sup> The first is concerned with employment, and measures the percentage of female workers in the formal sector, which is divided into parts requiring more or less formal education. It then measures average annual rates of growth in each as well as growth over the preceding five and ten years, respectively. The second relates to comparative wages in the different employment sectors. The third focuses on the proportion of hours of labour that are assigned to women in the 'informal' activities concerned with food production, processing, storing and marketing, and with water and fuel supply, household activities, child-care and community projects. The fourth covers formal education with statistics on each sector, and includes a breakdown of subjects to show what proportion of female students study science and technology. The fifth indicator is the percentage of female participants in non-formal education, such as in

<sup>11</sup> United Nations, Economic Commission for Africa, *The New International Economic Order: What Roles for Women?* (Addis Ababa, U.N.E.C.A., 1977).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

agricultural training. The sixth measure is concerned with health: the average distance from water points, by districts; the number of clinics per 100,000 women of child-bearing age; and the conventional infant and child mortality rates (of which the latter requires a breakdown for those between the ages of one and four in order to answer questions on malnutrition in the post-weaning period). The seventh indicator is land-ownership by women, in both traditional and land-settlement schemes. This is followed by relative access to credit and loans from all sources. The ninth indicator is rural technology, which includes the number of grinding mills and weeders per 100,000 population. Finally, measurements of the participation of women in decision-making positions in government, in parliament, on councils, and in the private sector.

This list is not exhaustive; it merely suggests certain aspects of women's lives where disadvantage is experienced, and towards which some or even most development is aimed. The goal is equality with men in the context of equality between classes and races, and districts and regions. The first step towards equality involves setting up a monitoring system which allows such information as is indicated above to be collected throughout Zimbabwe; a system that is sensitive to changes in policy since Independence, and that can monitor the effects of the reconstruction programme planned in conjunction with the Zimcord Conference.

### STATISTICS AND POLICY

In former times, there was no 'women's question'. Industrialization in the developed countries and colonization in the underdeveloped countries was largely responsible for breaking the unity of what was biological and economic, private and public.<sup>13</sup> The common factor between industrialization and colonialism is in this case the demands made by the market economy. When societies changed from organization around household production, women's roles became differentiated and unequal, and there was awareness of, if not concern for, this difference.

Changing this awareness into a concern seems most important in three areas of policy interest: the family economy, the informal economy, and the distributional effects of various development programmes. The three areas are interrelated but the focus in each is different.

The family economy is concerned with the income of the family: who earns it, who controls it, who spends it. The assumption too often is that the 'head of household', the man, earns the money and supports the family. However, all studies which have looked at women have stressed the great effort that women put into earning some income of their own, over which they have some control. Sometimes this is a small fraction of the family income, sometimes a large one. Increasingly the family income is the result of the work of two or more people rather than of one. Then the policy questions arise: what effect does a woman's income—or the lack of it—have on the health and nutrition of the children, and on their education; on the family's material living standards; on the ability of its members to participate in the wider social, economic and political structures of their society? All these are important issues in Zimbabwe's post-Independence restructuring of

<sup>13</sup> B. Ehrenreich and D. English, *One Hundred and Fifty Years of Advice to Women* (London, Pluto Press, 1978).

society. For there is also a group of families supported solely by the woman's earnings—owing to a husband's death, desertion, unemployment or ill health. Large numbers of market women in the Salisbury area are responsible for the support of their families;<sup>14</sup> in a study of the workforce of an industrial estate, over 80 per cent of the women residing on the estate were shown to be the sole income earners for themselves and any children.<sup>15</sup> Clearly, information is needed on means of income, and income distribution within households, as it is important for a whole range of research informing policy-making: the study of costs of inflation; research into the benefits of food subsidies; into the effects of minimum-wage legislation; in the promotion of employment opportunities and health education; and in measuring the incidence of poverty.

Secondly, the informal economy. This has recently been 're-discovered', stimulating an active debate on whether it should be encouraged or discouraged, separated, integrated or policed. In Zimbabwe some of these informally employed people have been described as 'pirate taxi operators, vegetable hawkers, curio makers, backstreet bicycle repairers, builders, furniture makers, tailors, prostitutes, shebeen queens, shoe-shine boys, herbalists . . . all of whom are ignored in official definitions of economic activities'.<sup>16</sup> Women play a larger role in the informal economy than they do in the formal, largely because of the restrictions on entering the formal labour market. Rural women weave baskets, crochet baby clothes, cardigans, bedspreads and table-cloths, sew and knit, grow vegetables, make cloth flowers, straw mats, pottery tea-sets and home-made peanut butter, in an attempt to earn some money. Urban women sit in overcrowded 'sweatshop' conditions, sewing for retail outlets, or walk the rich suburbs selling crochet dresses to White women; they sit near bus stations selling handfuls of tomatoes and onions, or outside beerhalls selling *sadza* and *nyama*. The living standards of the population in both urban and rural areas depend as much on these informal transactions as they do on those in the formal sector, and sometimes more; yet they are not valued in national accounts and are disregarded in policy-making.

Thirdly, the assessment of development in general, and of aid programmes in particular, has shown how neglect in scrutinizing women's roles has been a cause of some of the failures. Development always brings changes in the division of labour, and Boserup was among the first to demonstrate the dangers of depriving women of their productive functions and to point to the widening gap between men and women.<sup>17</sup> Several case-studies have demonstrated that development programmes ignore or misconceive women's roles and needs.<sup>18</sup> These studies were carried out in many different countries, and their implications for Zimbabwe are considerable. For example, the access of women to the means of production has been shown to be an important factor in the productivity of an area. Most important of all is access to

<sup>14</sup> L. Bonnerjea, 'Market Women: One Response to Men Being an Unreliable Source of Income' (Salisbury, Univ. of Zimbabwe, Centre for Applied Social Studies Report, 1981).

<sup>15</sup> J. May, *African Women in Urban Employment* (Gwelo, Mambo Press, Occasional Papers, Socio-Economic Series 12, 1979), Table 6.

<sup>16</sup> R. Davies, *The Informal Sector: A Solution to Unemployment?* (Gwelo, Mambo Press in association with C.I.R., From Rhodesia to Zimbabwe 5, 1978), 4.

<sup>17</sup> E. Boserup, *Women's Role in Economic Development* (London, Allen and Unwin, 1970).

<sup>18</sup> J. Giele and A. Smock (eds), *Women and Society: An International and Comparative Perspective* (New York, Wiley, 1978).

land, and many land-distribution programmes have foundered on the error of not allocating land and control to women as well as to men. Zimbabwe, too, embarking on an ambitious resettlement plan involving both refugees and landless peasants from overcrowded communal lands, needs seriously to consider where women's roles lie.

There exist numerous examples of 'invisible' women both in the First World and in the Third World. They are invisible in data-collection and invisible in policy-making. This is not simply a question of race or class or of women's rights. It is all these and more. It involves racial inequality, class inequalities and the lack of self-determination for women. And as subsistence farmers, it is women who provide the food that is eaten by the poor. If development is a process which is meant to benefit the poor, then planners should pay more attention to the subsistence sector and to the people who work in it.