

Women's Socio-Economic Roles in the Urban Sahel: A Preliminary Study of Bamako and Niamey

Marie Sardier

Introduction

In this paper, I examine women's socio-economic roles in two Sahelian urban environments: Bamako, Mali, and Niamey, Niger. This is done in the context of extremely rapid urbanization and a growing debt crisis in West Africa in the last 30 years, which is forcing a growing number of women into the urban labor force, particularly in the informal sector (Bradshaw and Noonan 1997, Gladwin 1991, Hirata and Humphrey 1991, Nelson 1997). Women's roles are many-sided and are all interconnected – all contribute indispensable services to households' livelihoods both in rural and urban environments. Whereas NGOs have been active in cities and have developed many programs to assist Sahelian women in training, economic endeavors, or social and emotional support, women's lives in Sahelian urban environments have often been ignored and remain poorly documented in the social science literature, and this has led many researchers and policy makers to perceive women only through documents about rural women. This preliminary study, therefore, is a step toward expanding the literature. It mostly describes women's participation in socio-economic activities and endeavors to create an overview of the current situation in two prominent Sahelian cities. My goal is to paint a general portrait of the commonalities and differences that we can see among these women. It is also to try to understand some of the major factors that might be sources of diversity.

Conceptual framework: Gender and Household

Gender theory and feminist politics were a great influence to this paper and were the main reason for choosing this topic. I tried to incorporate in my study unequal relationships among people based, in this case, mostly on gender and class. However, the significant disparities of these categories are not enough to bring to light the practices and relationships that situate people in hierarchical relations to each other. What this Six Cities project may allow us to do is to make sense of the processes and conditions that spatially divide different groups based on their rank in an unspoken hierarchical order. It can do so thanks to a combination of spatial, socio-economic and cultural data and data-analysis techniques. In this context, this is a first step in the analysis of the socio-economic data provided by the surveys.

Another important concept in this paper is that of the household. The household is understood here as the unit of production, consumption and residence. A member of the household can participate in either one or all of these three ways – contribute to the household through work, financially; eat in the household; sleep in the household. A household head typically makes decisions affecting the cohesion and economic viability of the household as a whole. Within this household, however, I take into account another basic social unit, particularly significant when one thinks of women's lives within it: the hearthhold, or "foyer", that is, the mother-child unit. This follows the increasing organization of work by each woman and her children within an extended and/or polygynous household.

The context

With a surface of about 1.270.000 km² (Niger) and 1.240.000 km² (Mali) of which 2/3 is desert, Niger and Mali are particularly poor Sahelian countries. In both cases, economic activity is largely confined to the area of arable land irrigated by the Niger River. According to the most recent census of 1998, and taking into account population growth of 3.3%, the population of Niger is estimated today at 8,960 million persons of which 75% live in rural or peri-urban areas. Estimates from July 2002 show the population of Mali to be 11,340 million with a growth rate of 3%. In both countries, extreme youth and the numerical importance of women characterize the population. More than 50% of Nigeriens and 47.2% of Malians are below 16 years of age, and women represent 50.3% of the population in Niger and 51.1% in Mali. In both countries, population growth is higher than that of the GNP, particularly in Niger where the GNP growth rate is negative.

Both Niger and Mali faced extreme economic difficulties in the 1980s. In both countries, drought was severe and a drop in agricultural exports ensued. Niger also faced a drop in uranium

prices and the aftermath of the economic crisis in neighboring Nigeria. In the face of such a severe situation, the governments of Niger – in 1983 – and of Mali – in 1981 – following incentives from the World Bank and the IMF, started vast structural adjustment programs. They demolished the limited amount of social security to which people had access, and diminished the amount of governmental employment available, when being a “fonctionnaire” was one of the only secure jobs an extended family member could obtain to support his/her kin. By 1984, with the inclusion of Mali into the “zone Franc” that also followed the programs, a sudden decrease in buying power of 50% for workers occurred in that country. In such a context, households could only count on themselves to secure livelihoods and survive. One of the most striking traits of this economic evolution is the increasing “informalization” of the labor force. As the formal economic sector became atrophied, informal employment rose exponentially as people had to find ways to secure their livelihoods and survive. Although there are no recent statistics regarding the situation in Mali, let us mention a survey done in 1989 and published by the government of Mali in 1991, which showed that 78% of employment in the country was in the informal sector. In Niger, the contribution of the informal sector to the GNP went from 71% in 1994 to 73.8% in 1995, and 76.5% in 1996.

Women’s contributions are often understood to be within this informal sector, as it is the sector of those with less education or training, and less network capital. In this context, the main hypothesis of many researchers is that women in urban environments in the developing world work increasingly outside the home. Some questions we might ask are whether this hypothesis is always verified. Are there differences between the two cities? Are there changes within the household if women are working outside? How do they organize the two kinds of work, inside and outside the household?

Objectives:

Within this framework and in light of the “Six Cities project” data, the main questions that I try to answer in this paper are: (1) In what different types of households do women live? (2) How do women contribute to a household’s revenues? And, is working outside the home becoming the norm? (3) What are the conditions of women’s household work? (4) Within and between the two cities chosen here, what are the differences and similarities that women face? I will first briefly describe the methods I used and the variables I chose; I will then attempt a discussion of the households, women’s household work and paid work as part of household livelihood strategies, as well as their financial contributions. Finally, I conclude with some brief suggestions for further research.

Methodology

This study uses statistical data from the Six Cities project, to investigate women’s participation in the economy. The random sample is of 2774 respondents in Bamako and 1852 respondents in Niamey. I first did a descriptive analysis of variables relating to household, occupation, income, and education. I then aggregated these variables with gender and/or household as key variables. Finally I compared the results for women and men, for different women, as well as for the two cities. The strength of this survey data over other methods used in research into the formal and informal economy is the representativeness of individuals studied. Previous studies have used ethnographies and small-scale surveys that are biased in terms of who is selected for study. We will see in the discussion what the limitations of the data are.

The descriptive analysis tells us about women’s relationships to the household head, their level of urbanization – understood as the length of time lived in the city –, as well as their level of education. In figure 1, we can first get a glimpse of the sample of the households in Bamako and Niamey. We can notice three main findings. First, the average size of the households in Bamako is considerably larger than in Niamey. This impacts both the number of persons per household and the total number of individuals represented in the survey. Second, in both cities, the number of girls and women as well as the number of youth – less than 16 years old - is below the national average. This results from migration patterns where more adult males migrate to the city and therefore decrease the overall percentage of women, girls and youth.

<p>BAMAKO: 6 counties (communes) 241 households 2774 individuals including 50.8% of girls and women (less than national average) 11.5 ind per household 40.5% < 16 years old (less than national average) 4% > 60 years old</p> <p>Ethnic Groups: Bambara = 34.7% Peul = 14,1% Malinke = 13.1% Soninke = 11% Senoufo = 6.3% Sonrhai = 2.8% Tamachek = 0.4% Other = 17.6%</p>	<p>NIAMEY: 3 counties (communes) 240 households 1852 individuals including 46.4% of girls and women (less than national average) 7.7 ind per household 43.8% < 16 years old (less than national average) 2.4% > 60 years old</p> <p>Ethnic Groups: Djerma = 53.5% Hausa = 29.9% Foreigners = 5,7% Peul = 3.8% Tamasheq = 2.6% Kanuri = 1.6% Gourmantche = 1.1%</p>
--	---

Table 1 – description of the sample in Bamako and Niamey.

In Figure 2, we glimpse the situation of women within the household – their relationship to the household head. A large majority of the women have a direct relationship to the household head: 60.2% in Bamako, and 81.9% in Niamey. They are either the household head themselves (2.3 and 2.6% respectively in Bamako and Niamey), a wife (22.2 and 29.2%) or a daughter (35.7 and 50.1%). The most striking difference between the two cities is the much higher numbers of daughters in Niamey in contrast to the higher numbers of nieces, other relatives, and non-relatives in Bamako (23.4% as opposed to 10.3%).

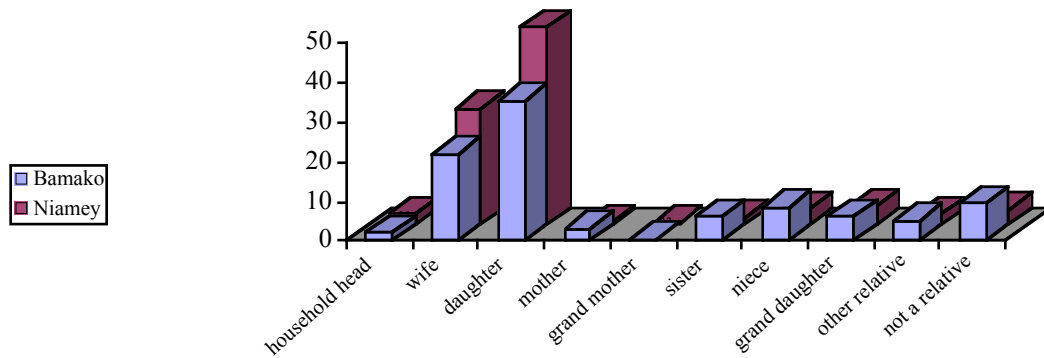


Figure 1 – relationship of women to the household head, in percentage.

Figure 2 displays the level of urbanization of women in Bamako and Mali. The level of urbanization is ascertained by collecting details on women's place of birth – within the two cities, or outside – and on how recently the women migrated to the city. We can see, therefore, that the level of urbanization of women in Niamey is lower than in Bamako, where 52.7% of all women were born in the city and 56.3% of those who migrated had lived in the city for 13 years or more. In Niamey, 49.5% of all women were born in the city, and, more significantly perhaps, 59.5% of

those born outside of the city had lived there for less than 13 years. This level of urbanization is significant because access to employment seems to be a function of the amount of time a woman has lived in the city.

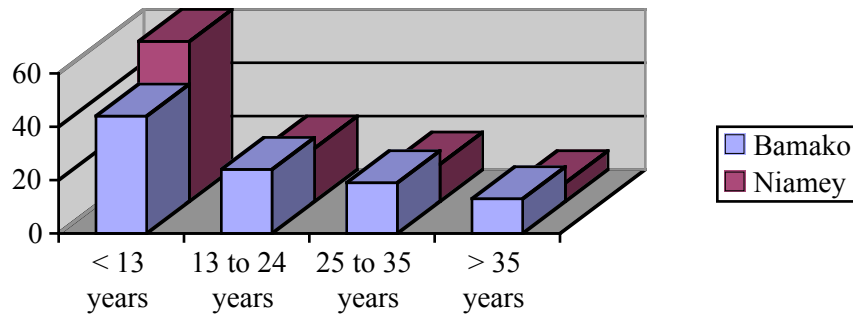


Figure 2 – Level of urbanization of women in Bamako and Niamey: number of years migrant women have lived in the city.

It was more difficult to get a precise understanding of women’s level of literacy. Overall, it is fairly low (0.885 with 0 representing no education, and 1 representing some primary education) and illiteracy is most prevalent among the older population. However, there were too many missing values for the levels to be significant.

Variables

Participation in the economy is decided based on the employment providing the respondent's primary source of income and secondary or tertiary sources of income. In the survey, interviewers recorded the respondent's job, and categorized the job into one general occupational category. Some of these categories refer explicitly to formal employment with administrative jobs, or the category "without a job," while others do not. Most of the women workers who could be coded as informal workers are domestic employees ('menagères' or 'aides familiales') or traders ('commerçante' or trader and 'vendeuse' or either seller or store employee).

The combination of main and secondary occupations forms these women’s livelihood strategies. One of the key findings is that most pursue a diverse range of livelihood strategies in addition to their main occupation, both when their primary occupation is work outside the home or when it household work. Livelihood strategies are defined as those activities undertaken by households to provide a means of living. A key goal of livelihood strategies is to ensure household economic and social security. In this analysis of women's livelihood strategies, emphasis is given to the range of income sources pursued, and the important role networks (as indicated by migrations and remittances) and the maintenance of the cohesion of the household continue to play in maintaining household livelihood security.¹

The main variables in the analysis are overall income, estimated contribution to the

1. The study of livelihoods and diversification is an approach that arose in the course of international development organizations and practitioners studying rural development. This discussion of livelihood strategies is restricted to the economic and social activities households perform to secure livelihoods. Some studies use broader definitions and have included such components as household assets, educational levels, access to services or financial capital (e.g, Chambers and Conway 1992; Carswell

household's income, household work and household size, as well as number of hearthholds in the household.

Discussion

In this discussion, I examine (1) the households in which women live (size, type), (2) women's household work (what, time constraints), (3) women's paid work (what, time constraints, income), and (4) livelihood strategies as a whole.

First, a brief description of the households in which the respondents to the survey live, shows us that the size of the households is much greater in Bamako (with more than half the households with over nine members) than in Niamey and, correspondingly, that the number of hearthholds per household is also greater in Bamako (with only 68% of the households being composed of a nuclear family). In both cities, women self-reportedly head almost 10% of the households. Figure 4 shows the details of the composition of households.

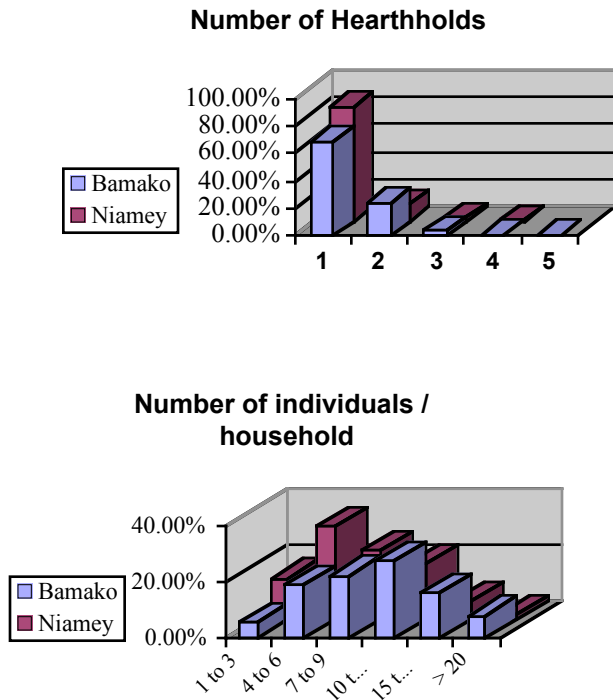


Figure 3 – Composition of households in Bamako and Niamey.

The main livelihood strategies outlined below include wage employment, small business enterprise, household work, and migration. This is important information for developing appropriate interventions. A second part of the analysis of the data, therefore, considers - albeit in somewhat rudimentary form - the importance of women's roles in maintaining the cohesion of the

1997).

household, and therefore maintaining household livelihood security.

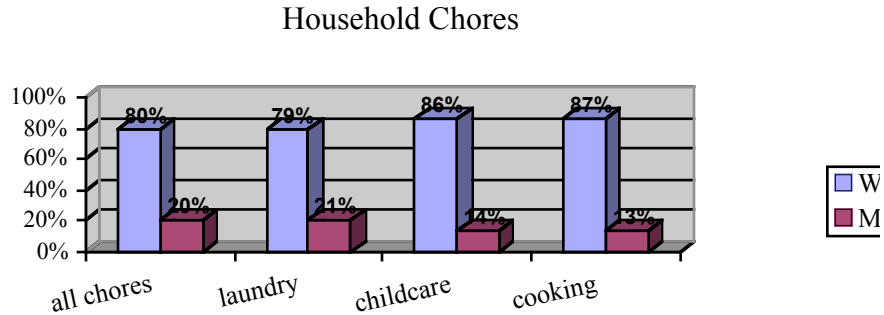


Figure 4 – Women and men’s participation in completing household chores.

I chose the three chores that seemed to be the most important in terms of the amount of time required to carry them out. I did not, however, take into account the time spent collecting water because of the great variation between households, between women (depending on the neighborhood, the amenities in the house...). However, from the literature, we know that this is one of the most time consuming chores of all for women who do not have running water, and therefore counts as one of the most important parts of the contribution of household chores to the overall working time.

When thinking about women’s work in the city, two phenomena are important to keep in mind. First, less time is spent on household work thanks to the presence of mills, to the use of rice instead of millet/sorghum, and for some to the easy availability of water, gas, or electricity. Second, however, there is another side to this phenomenon: access to spices, energy sources used for food preparation, water, and utensils is conditioned by the presence of money. Many daily expenses are therefore necessary, hence the increased necessity of finding employment outside the home. Such employment might be mentioned as a principal occupation, or a secondary occupation, or both. Women therefore are almost always engaged in remunerated work of some kind. The price of life in the city also adds to the low salary of the household head, or his lack of job, and increases the need to find employment as the main livelihood strategy. This strategy is primary, coming far ahead of asking for credit or belonging to a credit association (tontine).

The third part of the analysis, then, examined women’s work outside the home. Since the 1970s, researchers have commonly distinguished between an “informal” and a “formal” sector in the urban labor-force. The labor-force, however, cannot be simply divided into two types, for such a division obscures the complexity of the situation and the links between the two sides of the economy, as well as the fact that a great majority of individuals – not to mention households as a whole – belong to both labor-forces. This is especially striking in developing cities in general and in sub-Saharan cities in particular (Hart 1973, Tinker 1994, Larsson, Sithole-Fundire, Zhou, Schlyter 1995). We must also note that the problems relating to this dichotomy are particularly significant concerning women’s work. From the literature, we know that women are over-represented in the informal sector worldwide, and in Sub-Saharan Africa in particular. This basic fact has several dimensions. First, the informal sector is the primary source of employment for women in most developing countries. In some countries in sub-Saharan Africa, virtually all of the female non-agricultural labor force is in the informal sector: for example, the informal sector accounts for over 95 percent of women working outside the agricultural sector in Benin, Chad, and Mali (Chen 2003). Second, the informal sector is a larger source of employment for women than for men). Third, women’s share of the total informal workforce outside of agriculture is higher than men’s share in 9 out of 21 developing countries for which data are available (ibid.).

From the survey data, we know that, of the most represented occupations in Bamako, 29% of the women are traders, 21% are 'vendeuses', or vendors, 19.5% are 'ménagères' or 'aides familiales', and 10% work in administrative jobs (which are skilled and therefore not prominent given the level of illiteracy). In Niamey, 48.2% of women stay at home, although they may have a secondary job, 6.5% are traders (both formal and informal), 6.3% work in administrative jobs, and 14% describe themselves as being unemployed. There were problems, however, with the self-reported data in the surveys. It is not possible to know from the data, for instance, what kind of trade women participate in, whether it is informal or formal, or whether it is regional or international trade on a large scale, or local trade at the level of the city or the neighborhood. Vendors, ('vendeuses'), moreover, could be either street vendors or store employees. In Bamako, we are unable to distinguish between women who describe themselves as homemakers and those who call themselves house-workers (in someone else's house). The one consistent result we find is that there are many more house-workers (or family aides), either relatives or not, in Bamako than in Niamey, while there are many more stay-at-home women in Niamey.

The survey asked both men and women to self-report the amount of time they spent each day on activities, be they household chores, primary employment, or other occupations. In the fourth part of the analysis, then, we can aggregate men and women's overall contribution to working time (both in and outside the home). The results are consistent with the literature and show that on the average, in Bamako men spent 87 hours per week on work in and outside the home, and that women spend 121 hours per week on work in and outside the home.

Working, then, is both difficult (in the sense that it is time consuming but also that it is a difficult enterprise for most who are traders or vendors), and necessary. Informal work performed independently is probably the type of employment most practiced (most traders and vendors fall into this category). This, however, makes women vulnerable, due to the lack of income, investment, and education. And because these activities do not bring large amounts of income to the household, their activities are condemned to remain secondary to those of their husbands.

Finally, the survey gave information about women's financial contributions to their households, from their principal occupation, their secondary occupation, and from migration, as well as a self-reported estimated monthly contribution to the household. More detailed information in Bamako also allowed us to learn about the use of the money. In both Bamako and Niamey women contributed 59.5% of revenues from migration. This could be short-term migration, or long-term. In Bamako, women contributed 26.5% of primary occupation income and 29.5% of secondary occupation revenues. It is interesting to note that their estimated monthly contribution to the household was 27.5%, which is quite close to the actual survey results. In Niamey, women participate less frequently in a secondary occupation, which is reflected in their financial contributions to the households – respectively 30.1% of revenues from the principal occupation, and 22.9% of the revenues from the secondary occupation. Finally, we may ask ourselves what exactly women's income purchases. 62.5% of their financial contribution to the household goes solely to food. This can be related to the fact that they have to purchase everything in the city as opposed to the rural areas, and the time that would be spent in rural areas in the fields and gardens is spent in the city working to earn wages that will be used to buy food. Finally, women contribute 37.4% of the remittances given to persons outside the household. This proportion is quite a bit higher than their contribution to the financial well-being of the household and may be related to the necessity of maintaining the social as well as the economic well being of households and maintaining networks of support.

6. Conclusion and suggestions for future research

In brief, the ability of women to pursue livelihood opportunities is important for the overall social and economic sustainability of the household. The following findings from the study were thought most important:

1. Women pursue diverse livelihood strategies as a way of reducing risk.
2. The significance of women's financial contributions should be better documented.
3. Secondary incomes and revenues from migration are significant in maintaining the social and economic viability of households.
4. As population pressures continue to grow there will be increasing numbers of women engaged in informal activities (as traders, household wage earners, etc.).

5. While households are capable of actively finding solutions to meet their needs, long-term planning is sometimes subverted to short-term needs when perceived levels of economic and social security are low.

I wish, however, that I had been able to examine the distribution of participation in the formal and informal economy by gender. It has been shown, for instance, that in South Africa women are more likely to be in the informal economy: there 67% of informal jobs are filled by women, as opposed to 35% of all other jobs. Some other suggestions for further research would be to create a standard of living variable. This could be obtained from variables such as (1) the level of activity of the husband (active or non-active), (2) the work situation, (3) the presence or not of a maid, (4) whether the head of household owns or rents. These variables could then be correlated to obtain different categories of "level of life".² It would then be valuable to carefully correlate income, job, education, or household type to this variable.

There were problems with the study, some having to do with the data available, others having to do with statistical data in general. First, in some cases, aggregation was not significant and the differences in the data were not clear: the problem seems to be with the number of households surveyed at each coordinate point. Second, we beyond doubt need more qualitative data so that we can be more careful with the information gathered. I would like to understand, for instance, the level of difficulty of access to a job, or the changes in the women's position in the household when they work or when they do not.

Finally, going back to gender theory and feminist politics, I would like to end this paper with a call to combine qualitative data gathering with survey data and GIS technology. The Six Cities project could be a step in allowing us to appreciate the processes and conditions that spatially divide different groups in a hierarchical order. This would be through a combination of spatial, socio-economic and cultural data and data-analysis techniques. The politics of representation, however – rather than the people themselves – are frequently at the forefront of academic and applied writings, African women are time and again spoken for by others. Yet, feminist theories not only lay bare the prejudiced depictions of others, as well as practices, they also bring into play ways of acting against and changing such violence. As a first step, this project has offered the background necessary to go beyond the homogenization and silencing of African women. A necessary second step would be to convey the voices of women from Bamako and Niamey, and in doing so, follow Haraway's argument that knowledge is situated and partial (Haraway 1991). Only then can intervention countering violence against women hope to succeed.

2. MILESI, an NGO based in Bamako, carried out a survey similar to the present study in 1997.

References

- Bradshaw, York W. & Rita Noonan.
1997. "Urbanization, Economic Growth, and Women's Labour-Force Participation: A Theoretical and Empirical Reassessment," 6-22 in Joseph Gugler (ed.), *Cities in the Developing World: Issues, Theory, and Policy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Carswell, Grace
1997 'Agricultural intensification and rural sustainable livelihoods: A "think-piece",' IDS Working Paper, No. 64.
- Chambers, Robert and Gordon R. Conway.
1992. *Sustainable Rural Livelihoods: Practical Concepts for the 21st Century*. IDS Discussion Paper No. 296.
- Chen, Martha.
2003. "Rethinking the Informal Economy: From Enterprise Characteristics to Employment Relations." *Rethinking Labor Market Informalization: Precarious Jobs, Poverty, and Social Protection*. Cornell University,
- Coquery-Vidrovitch, Cathérine
1994. *Les Africaines. Histoire des femmes d'Afrique noire du XIXe au XXe siècle*, Paris, Desjonquères.
- Gladwin, Christina ed.
1991. *Structural Adjustment and African Women Farmers*. University of Florida Press, Gainesville.
- Haraway, Donna Jeanne.
1991. *Simians, cyborgs, and women : the reinvention of nature*. New York : Routledge.
- Hart, Keith
1973. 'Informal income opportunities and urban employment in Ghana', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 11, pp. 61-89.
- Hirata, Helena and John Humphrey
1991. Workers' response to job loss: Female and male industrial workers in Brazil. *World development* 19 (6) pp. 671-682
- Larsson, A., Schlyter, A., Sithole-Fundire, S. and Zhou, A. eds.
1995. *Gender Research on Urbanisation, Planning, Housing and Everyday Life*. Harare, Zimbabwe: Zimbabwe Women's Resource Centre and Network.
- Tinker, Irene (ed)
1995. *Persistent Inequalities: Women and World Development*, pp. 210-222.

Abstract

This study aims to fill two lacunae in the literature on development in Africa: the contribution of women in general to the development of society, and the role that women fulfill in the areas undergoing rapid urbanization, a newly emerging focus of research, because of the growing importance of these conurbations to the economies, and therefore the life, of these societies. Based on survey data from interviews conducted under the auspices of the Six Cities Project, the study compares the contribution of women in both the formal and informal economic sectors in Niamey and Bamako, the capital cities and major urban centers of Niger and Mali, respectively, focusing on the household as a unit of analysis, and especially on the "hearthhold," defined as mother-child interactions within a household. This study is a preliminary attempt to draw an ethnographic picture or overview of women's lives in these two urban centers at the aggregate level in order to create baseline understandings which can contribute to social and economic change and raise the position of women in society.

Key terms: women in development, formal and informal economic sectors, Mali, Niger, Bamako, Niamey, household, hearthhold, urban ethnography of African women

Résumé

Cet étude a pour but de combler deux lacunes dans la littérature du développement en Afrique: la contribution des femmes au développement social en général, et le rôle joué par les femmes dans les régions qui sont en voie d'urbanisation rapide, en particulier. Ce dernier est le point focal émergent des recherches, vue l'importance croissante de ces conurbations aux économies et vies de ces sociétés. L'étude est faite à base de données d'enquête des interviews qu'ont été conduites par le biais du projet "Six Cities." L'étude compare la contribution des femmes en secteur économique formel et informel à Bamako et Niamey, les capitales de Mali et Niger, en concentrant sur les ménages et surtout les foyers, consistant des interactions mère-enfants dans un ménage particulier. Cet étude tente de fournir une compréhension globale ethnographique des vies des femmes dans ces deux centres urbains à l'échelle des agrégats afin de créer des compréhensions de base qui peuvent contribuer au changement sociale et économique et élever la position des femmes en société.

Mot clés: les femmes et le développement; les secteurs économiques formels et informels; le Mali, le Niger, Bamako, Niamey, le ménage, le foyer, l'ethnographie urbaine des femmes africaines.

Resumen

Este estudio tiene el objetivo de llenar dos vacíos en la literatura sobre desarrollo en África: la contribución de las mujeres en general al desarrollo de la sociedad, y el rol que ejercen las mujeres en las áreas sometidas a crecimiento urbano acelerado, un enfoque nuevo de investigación, dada la importancia de estos procesos de urbanización para la economía, y por ello para la vida, de estas sociedades. Basándose en datos de una encuesta y entrevistas conducidas bajo el auspicio del Proyecto Six Cities, el estudio hace comparación de la contribución de las mujeres tanto en el sector formal como informal de la economía en Niamey y Bamako, las ciudades capitales y centros urbanos más grandes de Níger y Mali, respectivamente, enfocándose en la economía doméstica a nivel del hogar como unidad de análisis, y especialmente en el "hearthhold", definido como las interacciones madre-hijos dentro de la unidad doméstica. Este estudio es un intento preliminar de dibujar un cuadro etnográfico de la vida de las mujeres en estos dos centros urbanos en el ámbito de la economía doméstica para crear una línea base para el entendimiento de los cambios sociales y económicos junto con elevar la posición social de las mujeres en la sociedad.

Palabras Claves: mujeres y desarrollo, sectores de economía formal e informal, Mali, Bamako, Niamey, hogar o economía doméstica, etnografía urbana de mujeres Africanas.