



Doc. 3

Working paper for the 31th Study Session of the International Institute of Differing Civilizations - Brussels 17-20 Sept. 1958.
(Non-corrected proof)

The Role of Women in a Developing Sudan

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I. — THE ECONOMIC ASPECT

The sex distribution of the labour force i. e. of the proportion of the population economically active, deserves consideration for many reasons. For one, some jobs seem to be more efficiently performed by women than by men. Secondly, women are less mobile than men so that it is more difficult to shift them from one locality, occupation or industry to another. This is partly due to their greater responsibility in bearing and caring for children and homes. Thirdly, women tend to drop out of the labour force more easily than men. Finally, as more of the male than of the female sections of the population of working age join the labour force, a country may have a better chance of quickly expanding its labour force, other things being equal, by turning to its untapped female labour resources.

Of the Sudan's total population (10,262,500) 37 per cent (or 3,798,900) are economically active. When this group is related to the population of working age the percentage rises to 46.2 leaving an economically inactive balance of 53.8 per cent.

The Sudan's labour force is overwhelmingly male. Out of the total labour force (3,798,000) 90.6 per cent (or 3,443,400) are male and only 9.4 per cent (or 355,500) are female. Moreover the male section of the labour force amounts to 82.5 per cent of the total number of males of working age while the female section accounts for no more than 8.9 per cent of the total number of females in the same age-group. It follows therefore that the proportion of the population economically inactive is largely female. This is mainly due to the fact that household duties are usually shouldered by women and that

this occupational group does not qualify for inclusion in the labour force. We must remember, however, that the figures and percentages presented do under-estimate the female contribution to economic activity for many of the females primarily engaged in household duties often contribute, some of them substantially, to productive activity on a seasonal or part-time basis. It seems, none the less, that but for social 'conventions as to the propriety of females' working outside the home more women and girls would probably have joined the labour force in the urban centres. In the event, according to an analysis made by a member of the Labour Department of women seeking wage employment through the Khartoum employment exchange, the main driving force behind female participation in economic activity in urban societies is economic necessity, so that if this is removed such participants may drop out of the labour force. In the rural areas the position seems to be somewhat different. It is generally permissible for women to participate in the lighter agricultural operations, especially when the family is the productive unit. The evidence also suggests that in some parts of the rural Sudan (e.g. Western Darfur) some types of cultivation (in the case cited, winter cultivation) are by the customary division of labour entirely relegated to females.

Of equal interest are the proportions of economically active persons in the different age groups of the males and females of working age. Thus of the total number of boys five years of age or under puberty up to 52.3 per cent are economically active, while the corresponding percentage for girls in the same age group is as low as 6.9. A more glaring, though expected disparity, appears when we compare the proportion of economically active men and women over puberty. Thus of the total number of men in the age-group in question 96.5 are economically active while the corresponding percentage for women in the same age-group is no more than 9.4 per cent. Once more the main reason for these contrasts is the fact that girls and women are more concerned with household duties i. e. with work not included in the list of productive occupations. Moreover, the social and economic structures of the country afford more chances for the productive employment of boys than of girls.

The Sudan's predominantly agricultural and pastoral resources and its acute shortage of skills at both the senior and junior levels are reflected in the occupational structure of its labour force. Of the population of working age 53.8 per cent, as mentioned earlier, are economically inactive. Of the economically active occupational groups,



the group "farmers, hunters and fishermen" absorbs more of the population of working age — 28.9 per cent of it in fact — than any other while "animal owners" and "shepherds" account together for 10.8 per cent, being the second largest group. Each of the remaining eleven productive occupational groups absorbs but a tiny proportion of the population of working age. Thus each of the groups "professional non-technical", "professional-technical", "managerial, commerce and industry", "farm owners and managers" and "senior clerical and kindred" absorbs less than one tenth of one per cent of the population of working age, while "semi-professional technical" absorbs no more than 0.1, "protective services", 0.2 "junior clerical and kindred" 0.3, "machine operatives", 0.4, "semiskilled and skilled personal services", 0.5, "semi-professional non technical" 0.5, "farm labourers and forestry workers", 0.6, "shop and workshop owners and supervisors in industry and commerce", 0.8, "skilled personal services", 0.9, "labourers except farm labourer", 1.0, and "craftsmen and mechanics", 1.3 per cent of the population of working age.

It is worth mentioning that though women are represented in each of the above mentioned occupational groups their contribution in most cases is insignificant, especially where the work involves some training, skill or responsibility. There are, however, some interesting correlations between age and sex-groups and occupational distribution. Thus shepherds constitute the biggest productive occupational group among boys aged five to under puberty — while the group "farmers, hunters and fishermen" absorbs most of the males over puberty. Similarly care of herds seems to be the speciality of girls for only a tiny proportion of women over puberty are engaged in this activity. In fact the predominant women's occupation, as in the case of men, is cultivation etc.

The industrial, as distinct form, the occupational distribution of the labour force hinge on the following distinction between "industry" and "occupation". A person's « "occupation" is the nature of the work he actually does, his "industry" is defined by who he does it for ». Thus an electrician working for a transport concern is an electrician by occupation, a transport worker by industry. It is customary to distinguish three industrial groups, the primary producers, notably the agriculturists, the secondary producers, notably the industrialists, and the tertiary producers, notably these concerned with public and private services, trade, business, transport, etc. The industrial distribution of the Sudan labour force and of each of its age and sex-groups is set out in the table below :

	Primary Producers %	Secondary Producers %	Tertiary Producers %
All Males & Females	86.7	3.3	10.0
Males (5 and over)	87.1	2.9	10.0
Males (5 to under puberty) . .	96.5	0.9	2.6
Males (over puberty)	84.7	3.4	11.9
Females (5 and over)	83.6	7.0	9.4
Females (5 to under puberty) . .	84.7	4.9	10.4
Females (over puberty)	83.3	7.5	9.1

The bulk of the labour force and of each of its age and sex-groups consist of primary producers leaving a small balance for secondary and tertiary activities. Moreover most members of this balance, and in each age and sex subdivision of the labour force, are engaged in tertiary, leaving a smaller proportion still to secondary, industries. If subsidiary economic activities are considered, the percentages for secondary and tertiary production will probably rise a little — a point to keep in mind as our present industrial distribution of the labour force is based on the tabulation of principal occupations only. The distribution percentages differ, however, as between the sexes. Thus of all males in the labour force 87.1 per cent are primary, 2.9 per cent are secondary, and 10 per cent are tertiary, producers while the corresponding percentages for females are 83.6, 7.0 and 9.4 respectively. The difference seems to increase the younger the age group. Thus of all boys in the labour force aged 5 years to under puberty 96.5 are primary, 0.9 are secondary and 2.6 are tertiary, producers. This is to be contrasted with the following corresponding percentages for girls in the same age group : 84.7, 4.9 and 10.4 respectively. The explanation is that though employment (especially where little specific skill is needed) in any of the three sectors will equally suit a male — the secondary and tertiary sectors usually afford more suitable employment opportunities for females. For one, household services, petty trading and domestic handicrafts seem particularly suited to females and are often relegated by customary division of labour to them.

Minimum terms and conditions of employment for non-agricultural labour are fixed by laws that compare favourably with similar legislation even in an advanced country like the United Kingdom. The treatment assigned to men and women under these laws is the same



except that women's wage rates amount to four fifths of those of the men's. In addition the Sudan has laws specifically designed for the protection of women and children seeking and enjoying wage employment.

The unionisation of non-agricultural labour, including women, has progressed relatively quickly since the end of the second World War. While union membership is usually open to both sexes, and at least one union (the Male and Female Nurse Union) has women members, the government school-mistresses have set up their own Union instead of joining the school-masters.

The peasant family is the productive unit in traditional subsistence agriculture. Consequently women's economic activities are essentially integrated with the established rural way of life.

With the introduction of irrigation the rural scene is being transformed and the relative security of subsistence production, geared to the traditional way of life, has disappeared from many areas. Instead a new system of production and a new way of life is being born. The result is often much bewilderment, very well-described by the Social Research Officer of the Sudan Gezira Board as "conflict both on the surface and at deeper levels of consciousness as the demands of the changing economy and new social standards challenged deeply-rooted habits of thought and feeling". This statement is true of both men and women but it is particularly valid of women because of their deeper attachment to traditional ways and their relatively greater isolation from outside influences.

II. — THE POLITICAL AND LEGAL ASPECTS

In discussing the rights of any Sudanese citizen pride of place should be given to the Transitional Constitution of the Sudan. The Constitution begins by declaring the Sudan "a sovereign independent republic". To give substance to the democratic principle it confers, among other things, a number of fundamental rights on the citizens and residents of the country. These rights may be grouped as follows :

- i. *The Right to Freedom* : All persons in the Sudan, are declared to be free. They are, moreover, guaranteed by the Constitution a number of specific freedoms, viz, freedom of conscience, the right freely to profess one's religion, the rights of free expression

of opinion and of free association and combination. In addition, no person, says the Constitution, may be arrested, detained or imprisoned except by due process of law.

- ii. *The Right to Equality* : All persons are also declared equal before the law. Similarly the Constitution forbids discrimination between Sudanese on the grounds of birth, religion, race, or *sex* in regard to public or private employment or in the admission to, or in the exercise of, any occupation, trade, business or profession.
- iii. *The Right to Property* : No person in the Sudan may be deprived of the use or ownership of his or her property except by due process of law.
- iv. *The Rule of Law* : All persons and associations of persons in the Sudan, whether official or otherwise, are subject to the law as administered by the Courts of Justice, saving only the established privileges of Parliament. To ensure the integrity of the courts the Judiciary is declared by the Constitution, "an independent department of state" "free from interference or control by any organ of the government, executive or legislative".
- v. *The Right to Constitutional Remedy* : The Constitution gives any person the right to apply to the High Court for protection or enforcement of any of the rights outlined above and the Court has the power to make all such orders as may be necessary and appropriate to secure to any such applicant any of the rights in question.

The first thing to note in respect of the rights outlined above is that they are conferred on all persons, *males* and *females* alike. There is, in other words, no discrimination between citizens on the ground of sex.

It is to be noted, however, that the Constitution does not assert the equality of males and females in respect of the so-called political rights. It does not, on the other hand, assert that political rights should be confined to males. The fact is that the Transitional Constitution is silent on the subject. The electoral law under which the outgoing Parliament was elected gave the right to vote to adult males only. The few women who had voted did so in the Graduate's Constituency by virtue of having the educational qualifications. The same law, however, did not disqualify Sudanese women, merely on



grounds of sex, from the right to contest parliamentary elections. With the disappearance of the Graduate's Constituency, and the continued restriction of the right to vote to males, no woman can participate in parliamentary elections unless the law is modified. It is often claimed in defense of this that Sudanese women are relatively unsophisticated and cannot use the franchise, if given to them, wisely. But it can be argued with much justification that the women of the towns are often far better qualified to use their vote than the less enlightened men of the rural and nomadic areas. Moreover, we must not forget that there is a small minority of women who have had a modicum of elementary or intermediate education, not to mention those who have been to secondary schools or to the University, but who are none the less disfranchised while illiterate men enjoy the right to vote. If it be argued that the socially inferior position of women in Sudanese society, especially in the North where women do not participate in public life, would have made the extension of the franchise to them no more than a legal fiction, then the reply would be that any "improvement in the status of women should be encouraged and that it was therefore both unnecessary and invidious specifically to exclude women from the franchise".

The appointment in September 1956 of a National Committee to draft a permanent constitution for the Sudan sparked off a lot of activity by feminist societies and unions for the realisation of political rights for women. Meetings at which the feminist leaders spoke, were organised. A memorandum defining and defending women's rights in the political sphere was presented to the Chairman of the Committee. Though the movement is gaining ground in certain quarters, the principal political parties have so far shown indifference to the women's demands. Articulate public opinion is also on the whole unsympathetic, the prevalent view being that the feminist leadership ought to concentrate at present on improving the social status of women, on the fight against illiteracy amongst them and on combatting traditions and practices that hamper the emergence of Sudanese women as a constructive force both in the home and in society at large. At the back of all this is the familiar belief that women should learn how to walk before they aspire to run and that matters of public policy and administration are in any case primarily the concern of men, while those of the home and the family are, and should be, the principal occupation of the women. In recording all this we must not forget, that the tiny minority of educated women do not always confine themselves to activity in the social field and that they sometimes take sides in matters of national political import-

ance. Political activities or the voicing of political opinions are, however, undertaken on an individual and an *ad hoc* basis. The feminist societies and unions as such are not affiliated to particular political parties nor do they have any definite political complexes. They confine their work in the political sphere to the assertion of the women's right to elect and be elected acting as a sort of pressure group on all parties so as to realise what they want by enlisting the help, if and when such help is forthcoming, of any political organisation.

III. — THE SOCIAL ASPECT

The Sudan is a vast country with an ethnologically heterogeneous population representing differing modes of living, cultural patterns, and varying levels of social and economic development. By and large it is possible to distinguish between the predominantly negroid-pagan South and the predominantly Arab-Moslem North.

The sociological structure and cultural values of the former are distinctly different from those of the latter. But it is also important to recognise another broad division within the socio-economic structure of the North viz that between the urban and rural societies. These are necessarily broad, and therefore crude, classifications that do not do justice to the complexity of the human elements involved, but they may do for the purposes of this paper.

The most fundamental difference concerning the status of women in North and South is the so-called "seclusion" of women in the former. But what, as precisely as possible, is the meaning of this "seclusion"? "Seclusion" of women certainly does not mean the division of the members of the *same* household into males and females who, though residing together, have virtually separate lives. In many cases social customs may dictate that the two sexes in the same household eat separately, but for most functions of family life, the family is one unit. "Seclusion" is valid only for one sex in relation to the "stranger" or "outsider" of the opposite sex. To explain what is meant by "stranger" or "outsider" in this context, an example may be appropriate. I might be on very good terms with my life long neighbour, but I am still a stranger in relation to his women folks and must be treated accordingly. The same, of course, applies to him. The concept of the "outsider" itself is, of course, not precisely bounded, and we must expect to find a number of borderline cases varying from one household to another and from time to time.



"Seclusion" as so defined, has many manifestations in Northern Sudanese society. The most obvious of these is the way women are dressed outside their homes. As soon as they step out of their own gates they have to cover themselves up, exposing no more than their eyes, and this for obvious reasons. The layout of the typical Northern house with its two yards is designed to enable women to disappear into the back yard as soon as "strangers" of the opposite sex call on the male members of the household. Where no backyard exists the women must disappear into the often very hot rooms remaining there until the male visitors leave. Friendships between families do exist and even thrive. But the visits are exchanged by the members of each sex separately and mixed gathering whether at home or outside it are a rarity. Young men and women are not allowed to meet, even though they may be engaged to each other. A girl who goes out, if ever, with a boy does that at her own peril; her reputation will be smeared for life and she may never recover her respectability. Educated girls, seeking or obtaining employment, must of course encounter their male colleagues but they cannot go out with them after office hours. In the event, it is not surprising that marriages are in most cases arranged by the parents. The girls may sometimes be consulted but her contribution to the determination of her own future will not exceed a mere "yes" or "no" — and in many cases her "no" will be disregarded by the father.

It will be unfortunate if it is thought, because of what has just been said, that women in the North are a miserable oppressed lot. The fact is that the women, equally with the men, are born into the social structure. Having seen nothing different they accept the status relegated to them by custom, and they would themselves be the severest of critics if any one of their sex attempted to break away from it. Feminist leaders who have recently visited Europe returned to the Sudan full of objections to the free mixing of boys and girls, men and women.

To say this is, however, neither to explain nor to justify the system just described. At the back of it, is the unduly rigid interpretation given by orthodox commentators of the Islamic concept of the appropriate relations between the two sexes. Islam does not, of course, condone moral laxity. It exhorts Moslem women to dress sensibly and to avoid wearing, saying or doing anything that would arouse the baser instincts of the opposite sex. The Moslem woman is entitled to be consulted about her future husband and the last word in this matter is left to her. She is also exhorted to seek education and to

improve herself in every possible way. No line of human activity is denied, merely on the ground of her sex, to her. Indeed some women in the early history of Islam were noted for their scholarship and learning; some of them joined their husbands in the battle field. Despite all this some exponents of Islam have perverted its doctrines in the support of a dogmatic social system in which women are treated as inferior creatures incapable of responsible behaviour.

The basic economic dependence of women contributes to some extent to their socially inferior status both at home and in society at large. With economic "emancipation" women will no doubt acquire an increasing measure of independence and will increasingly assert their individuality. This is partly so because employment outside the home will by its very nature mean greater individual freedom and more contacts with members of the opposite sex. But it is also due to the greater self-confidence that it will instill in the women and to the greater prestige that it will give them in their own families and in society.

"Seclusion" in the rural areas is somewhat less rigorous than "seclusion" in the urban centres; joint activity in the field entails encounters between the two sexes which are not possible in a different mode of living. Similarly, mixed gatherings which are often a typical feature of village life have no opposite numbers among town dwellers. Despite this measure of freedom, however, social contacts between the two sexes are restricted even among the rural folk. Mixed outings are though not to the same extent as in urban areas, also limited — and the position of the male, both at home and in the community, is, as in the towns, also predominant.

A factor which has started to elevate the status of women and will continue to do so, is, of course, education. Educational opportunities in the Sudan still fall short of the demand for them — but the available educational opportunities for boys and young men are far greater than those for girls and young women. Moreover female education suffers from a late start and has always lagged behind male education. The first governmental girls' intermediate school was opened as late as 1940, while the first governmental girls' secondary school came into existence nine years later. The disparity just mentioned is very much reflected in the following school data for 1955-56 given in the official publication, Sudan Almanac.



Government Schools

Type of School	Number of Schools	Number of Pupils
<i>Boys :</i>		
Academic Secondary School	9	2,619
Commercial Secondary School	2	315
Technical Secondary School	1	169
Teacher Training College	4	553
Academic Intermediate School	42	6,702
Technical Intermediate School	4	649
Elementary School	486	83,450
Sub-Grade School	530	28,215
Subsidised "Khalwa"	98	6,400
Total Boys	1,176	129,072
<i>Girls :</i>		
Academic Secondary School	1	190
Teacher Training College	3	336
Academic Intermediate School	13	1,169
Elementary School	219	30,338
Sub-Grade School	50	3,150
Total Girls	286	35,183
Totals	1,462	164,255

Non-Government Schools

Type of School	Number of Schools	Number of Pupils
<i>Boys :</i>		
Academic Secondary School	10	2,131
Technical Institute	1	80
Teacher Training	10	725
Academic Intermediate School	53	9,423
Elementary School	110	11,886
Sub-Grade School	374	21,522
Total Boys	558	45,767
<i>Girls :</i>		
Academic Secondary School	7	449
Academic Intermediate School	15	1,376
Elementary School	45	3,931
Sub-Grade School	27	2,120
Total Girls	94	7,876
Totals	652	53,643

The late start of women's education was commented upon by a member of the outgoing British administration as follows :

"It is difficult to find any satisfactory answer to criticism of the Government in those early years — and even up to the 1930's for the rather dilatory treatment of girls' education... The Government should have siezed the opportunity to provide such schools whenever and wherever it knocked. Had it done so, much of the restlessness and psychological upset of the educated young men of to-day would have been avoided, and the whole social pattern would have been much farther along the road to balance than it is. But the opportunities, and there were several, were missed on the very inadequate ground of expense, and the importance of women in society was consistently under-estimated". This legacy of the past is still with us to-day and the educated young men are finding it difficult to obtain full happiness with their ignorant or barely literate wives. This is particularly true of young men who spent, in the course of their higher studies, several years abroad. A growing number amongst them is getting married to European girls, and thus have to face, though usually quite successfully, problems of adaptation of a different sort.

Of the fourteen Sudanese women, graduated from the University of Khartoum in the last few years, four have already got married while ten are still single though some of them are already engaged. Two of those who have married are preparing for second degrees abroad, as their husbands have been sent for higher studies overseas, one is a medical practitioner, while the fourth has preferred to devote herself to her family. Of the other ten eight have joined the teaching profession and two are doing work of an administrative nature.

The study of the liberal arts seems to attract most women students and of the fourteen graduates twelve hold degrees or diplomas in arts, one in science and one in medicine.

The alternation between University and home in the lives of these girls represents the two worlds in which the feminine *elite* at present live. In the University, they mix freely with the men students whether in the class-rooms or in the Students' Union. They receive equal treatment from the staff, they enjoy the wider horizons that higher education affords them, and they develop their own individual personalities, not to mention the physical comforts of their charming hostel. At home they slip back into the world of their mothers and grand mothers, into the traditional framework where women are expected to be self effacing and docile, where their newly developed spirit of independence may be regarded as tantamount to imperti-



nence or immodesty, and where the older generation may try hard to reshape them according to what the customary ideal of womanhood may decree. This alteration between two worlds causes them much psychological discomfort — but their mental resilience is often exhibited in their ability to behave in both worlds with restraint and moderation. They also find outlet for their newly discovered sources of initiative and energy in the leadership of the feminist organisations, the biggest and most active of which is the Sudanese Women's Union.

This body was formed in January 1952 in order to (i) better the conditions of the women of the Sudan by improving their domestic standards, setting up a training centre for embroidery, needle work and fine arts, opening day and night schools, initiating literary circles, libraries and a publications bureau, establishing relations with foreign women's associations, organising overseas study courses and by establishing an orphanage and child centres. (ii) The Union aims, in the second place, at protecting women's rights in relation to employment, equal pay for equal work, the right to elect and be elected, as well as their social rights. (iii) It aims, thirdly, at protecting the family by making divorce more difficult, by combatting polygamy, and by enhancing the protection of children. (iv) And finally the Union tries to develop national consciousness and to initiate and participate in charitable activities.

The Union has tried to live up to its declared objectives. There are already two intermediate, three elementary and ten night schools to its credit. It has also contributed to the fight against illiteracy among urban and rural women. Its annual Women's Week draws much support from men and women alike and its campaign to raise funds has been spectacularly successful. The Union claims a membership of 7,500 women distributed between its twelve branches in the principal towns and cities of the Sudan. Its Ondurman headquarters enjoys the membership of 1,320 women, and the active or passive support of a great many others. Judging by the determination and zeal of the newly formed feminine *elite* there is every hope that Sudanese women will in the not very distant future play a much greater role in the life of the Sudan than is at present possible.