

SAREC DOCUMENTATION

THE CHALLENGE OF  
COMPLEXITY

THIRD WORLD PERSPECTIVES ON  
POPULATION RESEARCH

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# Preface

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The preparations for the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo 1994 provoked a wide range of activities among international organizations, donors and in the research community. Newsletters, articles and brochures have been distributed to encourage, conserve or change population policies. The knowledge base for the debate has primarily been research results from research institutions in the industrialized world. Many such research results on population issues in developing countries are derived from aggregated data covering differences between various locations within countries. On the other hand, local studies are often carried out with time constraints not allowing the researcher to penetrate cultural characteristics. Questionnaires are designed to fit universal theory rather than local reality. The result is a bulk of superficial and contradictory findings, very often giving policy implications based on the individual researchers preconceived ideas.

Obviously, there is a need to redirect research and implementation concerning population issues. The complexity of population dynamics presents a challenge that can only be understood from local perspectives. Policy makers need such understanding to formulate and implement necessary policies related to population. To produce this understanding, basic knowledge of the local culture is essential, which is most likely to be found among national researchers.

The Swedish Agency for Research Cooperation with Developing Countries, SAREC, combines support to research that contributes to the solution of important development problems with efforts to strengthen national research capacity. From this point of departure, SAREC wanted to know more about how indigenous researchers from developing countries tackle the challenge of complexity.

Some examples from our endeavour to explore Third World perspectives on population research were presented at the conference Population Reconsidered – Empowerment, Health and Human Rights, in Harare, Zimbabwe, 6-10 December 1993. The conference was jointly arranged by SAREC, the Swedish International Development Authority, SIDA, and the Union of African Population Studies, UAPS. These articles have now been compiled here, with the ambition to preserve as much as possible of their genuine approach and appearance.

The diversity of the challenge posed is clearly illuminated by the choice of topics. The articles have been grouped into three parts in the volume, though these groupings are far from clear-

# Explaining the dynamics of female labour force participation

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## 1 Introduction

This paper reviews some of the results of a series of studies addressed to describe and to explain the dynamics of the female labour force in Argentina. They were conducted between 1976 and 1992. In all these studies females were looked upon vis-à-vis males, and attention was given to the constraints imposed upon the females by their simultaneous occupancy of the productive and the reproductive roles as labourers and as mothers/wives. The results stem from macro- and micro-level research, cross sectional and longitudinal designs, secondary (quantitative and qualitative) and primary data obtained from population statistics, texts (encyclicals, pastorals, laws, parliamentary debates, books, newspapers, magazines), life histories, and interviewing. Data were analysed by means of multivariate, content and discourse analysis. The structure of this paper will follow the history of the research.

Before proceeding we will offer a brief overview of the context. By 1970 Argentina ranked among the most urbanized countries in Latin America and among the ten most highly urbanized in the world, with almost 80 per cent of its population residing in cities. It differed from most countries in the region because of the low fertility rate, the relative racial homogeneity and the existence of a large middle class. Its population age structure was relatively old and its literacy level considerably high, as well as the level of industrialization. The percentage of economically active females aged 12 and over was fairly high (25.3 per cent) compared to the rest of Latin America, to Asia and Africa, though relatively low in relation to the United States and several European countries. Over two-thirds of the active women worked in the service sector, as domestic servants

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and as professionals and technicians in the health and education areas.

## 2 Research results

### 2.1 Socio-demographic determinants of the supply of female labour force.

This is a macro-level study (Wainerman 1980) on some of the socio-demographic variables determining the supply of female labour force<sup>2</sup>. They were chosen following Youssef's (1974) contention characteristics of females and the level of educational achievement. We added a third one, the life-cycle stage as indicated by the years of age.

The relationship between fertility and female labour force participation has drawn great attention from students of female economic activity. Even though many of the studies in this area have acknowledged the significance of education, they have paid little or no attention to the interrelations among the three variables (Jaffe & Ridley 1976).

Taking into accounts these antecedents, we conducted a study in Argentina in 1970 with a twofold aim. On the one hand, to identify which female groups, differentiated by educational level and 'family situation', that had a greater propensity to participate in the labour market. Family situation was defined in terms of the presence or absence of husband and children at home. On the other hand, to assess the extent to which educational attainment and the family situation influenced that propensity at different stages of the life cycle.

The data were drawn from the 1970 Argentine population census and the analysis was conducted at the national level. We started by analysing the effects of one variable at a time, and then continued by describing the changing interaction between education and family situation on the one hand, and the female labour supply on the other, for different age groups. We will now summarize the major results attained.

The probability that females participate in the labour market was closely related to years of schooling, ie the longer the schooling the higher the probability that females participate in the labour force. The activity rates<sup>3</sup> of the females with higher education (80 per cent) were four or five times as high as the

activity rates of illiterate and incomplete primary school females (about 20 per cent). A high investment in education not only favours that women enter the labour market but also that they stay longer in it. Females differed substantially from males: formal education acted as a recruiting criterion into the labour force for the former but not for the latter. Males had high participation rates whatever their educational levels.

Regarding the marital and fertility patterns, the data showed that more than half of the females in the workforce were single, only one-third were legally or consensually married, and the rest were widowed, divorced or separated females. In comparison with the non-working female population, single women were over-represented and married women under-represented in the labour force; separated and divorced women behaved as single women, and widows as married ones. This suggested that it was the presence or absence of a husband that influenced females' entry into the labour market rather than the marital status *per se*. The effect was so strong that even between ages 40 and 59, when the demands from small children have disappeared and family burdens become more similar for single, married, divorced or separated women, the differences in labour force participation among them remained at similar levels as among the younger women.

The presence of children showed a similar negative influence upon female economic participation; at each age group between 20 and 59 years the activity rates of females with large numbers of children were lower than those of childless or one-child females. Hence, among women the family situation defined in terms of the presence or absence of a husband and children at home, functions as a recruiting criterion into the labour force. This is not true for men; whatever their age and the presence or absence of a wife and children at home, most of them are in the labour force.

The activity rates of women with and without husband and with or without children showed that the presence of a husband had a greater discouraging effect on labour participation than had children. In fact, whatever the number of children, the activity rates of women without husband (single, widowed, and divorced), always surpassed those of women with husbands (married). The average length of the working life of childless married women (13.0 years) was much shorter than that of childless single, widowed, and divorced women (23.7 years) aged 29 to 54 years. Different economic needs were a major explanation. However, this pattern also revealed cultural representations regarding the perception of appropriate behaviour for men and women, particularly for married women.

<sup>2</sup> The labor force includes employed and unemployed workers.

<sup>3</sup> Activity rate measures the number of female workers of certain age (or school level, or marital status, etc) over the number of all the females of that age (or school level, or marital status, etc) times 100.

Marital and reproductive patterns are not independent of the educational level achieved. On the contrary, they vary systematically with it. In the Argentinean population census of 1970, the percentage of married women in each age cohort decreased as education attainment levels increased. The most educated women tended to marry later; between 20 and 24 years of age, about half the females with preliminary schooling were already married, while the percentage fell to one third among those with secondary schooling, and to 15 per cent among women with higher education. On the other hand, for females aged 40 and over, the average number of children of the less educated females more than doubled that of females with secondary education. Concurrently childless females aged 50 and over represented only 10 per cent in the illiterate group and three times more in the group with secondary and higher schooling. These trends hold for female workers also.

We wondered whether the greater tendency to enter the labour force of the better educated females was due to the facilitating effects of education itself, or to having a family situation more compatible with holding a job. Since the activity rates of the most educated females proved to be higher than those of the least educated ones, whatever their age and family situation, we concluded that education is influencing female economic behaviour *per se*. The question then posed was; under what conditions do the effects of education surpass those of the family situation and under what conditions does the reverse hold true?

The comparison between the activity rates of females with husband and two or more children who have achieved the highest level of education, with those females with neither husband nor children who have not even completed primary school, showed the effects of education and family situation to vary along the life cycle. The influence of the family exceeded that of education among young women aged 20 to 29. Among females over 30 the effects of education exceeded those of the family. These findings might be explained as follows:

The young females (20 to 29 years) have two or more children who, for the most part, have not entered primary school and make the greatest demands on mothers; at this stage the family burdens keep many of these women out of the labour force. At the age 35 and above, the two or more children most probably are at school and exert relatively smaller demands on the mothers; ie the two or more children, though quantitatively constant, impose quite different constraints upon females along the life cycle.

Hence, children have different meanings for women. They prevent women with the lowest educational level, who have access to the least privileged positions in the economic structure, from entering the labour force. They push women with the same educational level, but with absent husbands, to enter the labour force to support the family. Finally, children have little influence on those women who, on account of their high educational levels, have access to more privileged occupational positions, whether they share the responsibility for economic family burden with a husband or not.

## 2.2 Cultural orientations determining the supply and demand of the female labour force since the beginnings of the 20th century

This is a macro-level study (Wainerman 1979; 1981; 1983; 1986) addressed to identify the normative dimension of culture that regulates the sexual division of labour and the relationships between females' reproductive and productive roles in Argentina since the beginnings of the 20th century.

The study was stimulated by the huge differences in economic activity rates of females with and without spouses whatever their age and number of children found in the study previously summarized (Wainerman 1980). That the domestic burden imposed by the presence of children is neither the exclusive nor the main cause that keeps women away from the labour market, is made conspicuously evident when comparing the average length of the working life of women aged 20 to 54 years, with and without husband and children<sup>4</sup>. It was also suggested by the evidence that nothing like this happens among men. The length of their working life proved to be independent of their family situation, age, schooling, etc. It was already well established by the 1970's that when countries with different levels of development were compared, the activity rates of males aged 20 to 54 years were generally around 90 per cent, whereas among women the range of variation in activity rates was wide (from 85 per cent in the USSR to 7 per cent in North Africa ca 1970). Within countries the range was almost as wide with reference to women from different age groups, marital status, number of children, level of schooling etc.

We hypothesized that the differences between the labour behaviour of women with and without husband, as well as

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<sup>4</sup> It ranged, among those with husband, from 5.3 (with two or more children), to 7.3 (with one child), to 13.0 (with no child), whereas among those without husband the corresponding figures were 18.0, 21.5 and 23.7 working years.

those associated with the sexual segmentation of the labour market, are accounted for by cultural reasons more specifically, by the cultural definition of both sexes and by the sex-role division between the productive and the reproductive functions that prevail in each society. There already existed enough empirical evidence showing that demographic, economic and sociological features, though major determinants of the size and composition of the female (as well as of the male) labour force, are not the only ones. It is logically possible to think of two social formations similar in their population structures (especially similar proportions of active-age females), and similar socio-economic circumstances but quite different levels of female economic participation. In other words, it was asserted that a more satisfying explanation of female labour force participation requires to bring in elements of the ideational (cultural) system, more specifically, an analysis of the culture's normative dimension that regulates the relation between domestic (reproductive) and labour (productive) roles<sup>5</sup>.

These antecedents were the basis for a research project that aimed to identify and to describe the normative dimension of culture regulating the sexual division of labour and the relationship between females' productive and reproductive roles in 20th century Argentina.

To explore the effects of these cultural orientations on the economic behaviour, ie the links between the realm of *ideas* at the social levels and that of *behaviour* at the individual level, the research programme centred around four points in time. They were chosen because of their social, economic, and political significance in Argentine history, and upon the existence of census data on the labour force. The four dates were around 1910, 1930 and 1970. The research addressed the societal and not the individual level, cultural rather than individual orientations, norms rather than attitudes. We investigated the ideational orientations produced and diffused within four social realms: religion, law, school and mass media.

The Catholic church (which has official status in Argentina), is a primary producer of ideology, promotes norms and values with an aim of controlling behaviour. The family, defined as the trustee of unquestionable religious beliefs, represents the nucleus that maintains the faith, the survival of the very religious institution. Hence, the church deserves special attention as it regulates the roles that both sexes ought to fulfil in all realms of life.

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<sup>5</sup> The recognition of the status of culture existed, but had not originated research, with the exception of Boserup's (1970) influential work.

The legal realm (more specifically; labour and family law) was chosen because it is the set of norms most formally institutionalized and with the greatest coercive power in society. Primary school – which in Argentina is and was under control of the State – is the institution responsible for the formal socialization of the future citizens; it plays a major role in the transmission of the ideas of the establishment. Mass media (the 'fourth power') include a sector specifically addressed to female readers, that is why women's magazines were selected for analysis.

The empirical translations of the ideational orientations are 'messages' that circulate at the social level under the form of 'texts' embodied in legal norms, religious documents, school books, magazine articles and advertisements, etc. These entities, which are observable, constituted the (qualitative) data on which the research was based. In all cases they were written texts.

The reading of the texts combined the aims of the semiological analysis (French style) with the techniques of the content analysis (US style). The texts were approached with a series of categories such as: conception of female and male (physical and psychological traits, roles assigned); the conception of the family (roles assigned to it in society and roles ascribed to its members on the basis of sex); the conception of work (occupations assigned to females and males, consequences attributed to work in one and the other), etc.

The aim was to detect the systems of meaning underlying the texts. For example, until 1974 women and minors were dealt with together in labour law (and with Amero-indians). This suggested that common features – weakness, helplessness, need for protection – were found in these groups, but not in adult men. The emphasis on the qualities of mother and wife, or on the humanitarian rather than on the scientific or artistic achievements of famous female (but not male) scientists, artists and writers presented in schoolbooks as role models, suggested that even for 'extraordinary' women (eg madam Curie), the true place was at home, in service of their husbands and children.

A succinct view of the core ideational orientations concerning women as agents of production and reproduction in Argentina around 1950, prevalent in the four social realms mentioned above, are presented below. The aim is to exemplify what can be achieved with this methodological approach, rather than to offer conclusive evidences on how the secular effects of culture influence the dynamics of the female labour force.

A series of evidences point out that around 1950 a significant change occurred in the history of the female labour force in

Argentina. The end of an era of import substitution initiated a new style of development. Deep political transformations came along with the emergence of Peronism (1945-55). At this time female economic participation reached the lowest level of the country's recorded history, and started recovering slowly towards 1960 and rapidly towards 1970 and onwards. This is, on the other hand, the time when the low crude birth rate (around 25 per cent – which in fact had been decreasing without interruption since the end of the 19th century – raised deep concern in certain circles and originated the National Board for Fighting Low Birth Rate, and numerous articles in several journals blaming female economic participation for the (perceived) birth rate fall. It was also the time when women were granted political rights (1947), when they first entered the Parliament (1951), and when they massively joined a political party, the feminine wing of the Peronist movement.

The ideas were sustained by both the universal and the local levels of the Catholic church were highly consistent. Both sexes were seen as essentially different because of their different biology and according to the Holy Law. Women were the trustees of affections, of heart; they were weak creatures in need of protection; their natural habitat was the domestic and private world. Men were the trustees of intelligence and authority, of the head; they were strong creatures who, because of that were destined to give protection, their natural habitat was the outside and the public world. Within the family he was to be the master and the sole provider of economic needs, whereas she was to be his submissive, obedient companion, the sole responsible for the reproductive activities.

Participation in the labour force was not proper for females, especially if married, as it competed with their natural vocation: motherhood. It was accepted only in cases of extreme need when the natural provider, the man, was absent, disabled, or unable to make a sufficient contribution. In those cases, work meant a sacrifice for women since it detached them from their very nature. On the contrary, work was for men an inalienable right, a way of taking part in the Holy work of Creation.

Although the decade under the aegis of Peron was prodigal in measures addressed to protect workers (and to enhance the political status of women by granting them the right to vote), it was not equally prodigal regarding the civil and labour status of women. Legislation, courts, and jurists kept handling women's labour together with minors' labour – as they did do since the beginning of the century – attributing to women a certain degree of incapability and weakness demanding protection (from adult males). In the legal realm, both sexes were

assigned different physical and psychological capacities. Intelligence and strength were men's provinces. Within the family he was the authority and the sole responsible for the family sustenance; with regard to his wife, he was the heir of her fathers' duties and rights. Affection and weakness coupled with submission, were female traits. Marriage – the same as achievement of the legal age of majority – granted emancipation to him, whereas it diminished the civil capacity of women (which was yielded to their husbands), even if they had reached the age of majority. Economic behaviour was discouraged for women because it competed with their fundamental responsibility: the reproduction of future generations.

The schoolbooks in use during the period showed women as 'naturally' weak, in need of protection, specialized in the sphere of affections, their natural habitat being indoors, in the inner space, their major role in life being the mother's role in which they started their training early in life by playing with dolls. Men, on the other hand, were 'naturally' strong, clever, active, their natural habitat being outdoors, in the outer space, their major role in life being the productive role, in which they were early trained by playing to be a policeman, a fireman, a soldier and the like.

Apart from school teachers – who in fact were depicted in schoolbooks as (second) mothers rather than as members of the labour force – the feminine characters shown as economically active were very few. Those who worked – in a short range of activities (36), most of which required low qualifications – did so because of extreme economic necessity. It was never because of mere desire, special skill or burning talent, but because they lacked a male figure (father or husband) who provided for their sustenance. For them work was a sacrifice. Men, instead, worked with joy, to supply their daily needs, in a broad range of activities (194) which demanded a varied range of qualifications.

Both women's magazines analysed (one for middle- and the other for upper middle-class readers) presented two kinds of female images: the mother and the sex object. The former (character of fiction and short articles) was closely attached to the household and the reproductive role, with no other alternatives except for procreation, motherhood, dependence, and submission. The other group (characters in beauty product advertisements) was mainly oriented to consumption. For both of them love, romanticism, chasing a husband were the central goals of a woman's life. It was the man who was active and dominant, who provided financial and emotional sustenance, who offered security and support. There was no reason, then,

for women to go to work. The possibility that the productive and the reproductive roles might be shared was denied, hence, labour ought to be avoided by married women, except in cases of extreme economic deprivation or else, among high-class women, when there existed a strong vocation (generally in the world of arts). Single women in addition to gain training in running a family and a house, could engage in economic activity, but only until they got married. Presumably they were making time until marriage.

In both magazines, among the fiction heroines, those economically active did not exceed one third and were recruited among young, middle class, single women that were employed in clerical and secretarial jobs. The few working married women had jobs that were less incompatible with the domestic roles; they were farmers or laundresses (if lower class) and actresses, painters, or writers (if upper class), ie they were not obliged to a fix, full-time schedule, away from home.

The consistency found in the dominant ideational orientation of all four realms was overwhelming, disregarding some ideational shades. The ideational core underlying this mass of messages had its cradle in the realm of the Catholic church. The Catholic view was that there existed essential differences between both sexes, biologically based and established by the Holy Order, unmodifiable, unalterable and indifferent to any influence from the social environment. If any one dare speculate about the nexus between the ideational level and the behavioural, it should not be surprising that around the 1950's the contribution of women to Argentina's labour force was only 20 per cent, the lowest figure of the whole recorded history. The strongly differential participation in the labour force of women with and without a husband should not be surprising either. Around 1960, for instance, there were five single women for each married woman in the labour market, a relationship that by 1970 had narrowed down to about one in three and a half.

### 3 Living and working conditions of female nurses in Argentina

The next step was a combined macro- and micro-level study of one sector of the labour force, the health sector, with special emphasis on nursing. The activity was chosen for it is one of

the most 'typically feminine' occupations<sup>6</sup> and because it poses female workers major constraints in order to articulate the productive and the reproductive roles (Geldstein & Wainerman 1990a; 1990b; Wainerman & Geldstein 1990; 1991).

The study was stimulated by a theoretical interest in descending from the macro-level to the micro-level to study the mutual and complex changing interaction between family and working life along the different stages of the life cycle. The macro-level and statistical data are well suited to describe and to explain some structural aspects of social phenomena but they do not allow to penetrate individual motivations, attitudes, values, conflicts and the myriad of events that develop and change in everyday life along the individual's life history. The macro-level is suitable for generalizations, the micro level to get the flavour, the taste, and the texture of social life. The former is most adequate for the study of 'historical time', the later for the study of 'individual time'.

Our research had a twofold aim. On the one hand, to describe the female and male nursing-population<sup>7</sup> in Argentina in terms of socio-demographic and occupational characteristics<sup>8</sup>. On the other hand, to get an insight into the concrete living and working conditions of a small number of auxiliary female and male nurses with special emphasis on their daily organization, and modes of articulation of their productive and reproductive roles.

The former aim was investigated on the basis of the 1980 Argentine population census, the latter on the basis of semi-structured interviews and life-histories with about 30 female nurses and 20 male nurses employed in three public and private health institutions in Buenos Aires. The interviewees were selected among people who had experienced mother- or fatherhood and who were at different stages in the life cycle; young with small children at home, and mature with grown-up sons and daughters living away from home.

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<sup>6</sup> *Typically feminine* because the majority of nurses are females and because caring, healing, helping, comforting are socially assimilated to mothering.

<sup>7</sup> In a previous research we studied the size and the socio-demographic characteristics of all workers in the health sector, including females and males and all occupational levels, from auxiliary nurses to hospital directors (Geldstein & Wainerman 1990a).

<sup>8</sup> Sex, age, marital status, education and fertility level (for females); a number of household characteristics like type, size, composition and socio-economic level; and the occupational position of nurses in terms of private or public place of work, and occupational status.



For the sake of brevity only partial results will be given here in order to show the usefulness of moving from the macro- to the micro-level of research, and from statistical (secondary) data to socio-anthropological (primary) data. Emphasis will be on female nurses.

In 1980, 83 per cent of Argentina's nurses were females. They were relatively older and more educated than the rest of the female labour force. This is partly due to the fact that nursing requires formal training, whereas other 'feminine occupations' like domestic services do not. The educational structure of female nurses revealed the heterogeneity of the occupation. Near two thirds, the auxiliary nurses, have only had primary school and some years of secondary school. They came from the low socio-economic sectors of the population. The rest, the professional nurses, had completed secondary school, had some years of college and came from the middle-class sectors.

The oldest female nurses (over 40 years of age) were concentrated among the least educated and the youngest among the most educated. This is probably because in the past hospital workers with only on-the-job training obtained a nursing degree ('empirical nurses'). Since 1967, at least primary school and a nine-month course in nursing is required from auxiliaries, and secondary school and two and a half years of nursing training from professionals.

The proportion of females with husband among nurses aged 25 and over was somewhat smaller than among all other female workers and, conversely, the proportion of widows, single and more especially of separated and divorced female nurses, was greater. Female nurses were more frequently heads of household than the rest of female workers, a feature consistent with the high proportion of single, widows, separated and divorced among them. Fertility patterns among nurses differed very little from those of the rest of the female labour force. The proportion of female nurses living in one-person, and in nuclear households was relatively low whereas those of nurses living in incomplete nuclear (without spouse), extended (two or more generations or one generation and in-law members) and composite (including non-kin members like boarders, lodgers or roomers) were much larger than in all the country's households. These kinds of living arrangements are typical for low income sectors among which support networks of kin and friends are more frequent as they allow to share living expenses and child care.

It is tempting to hypothesize that this higher propensity to family dissolution is a consequence of the high degree of incompatibility faced by these workers trying to comply with the

demands of their working and family lives. It should be taken into account that nursing is a most stressful occupation, demands lengthy hours of work, often by night and at week-ends. But an alternative explanation cannot be dismissed; that it is precisely the absence of a husband that pushed divorced and separated women (and young widows) to move into salaried work. The short training time (9 months) and the sole primary school level required by the lowest (auxiliary) nursing level, coupled with the huge, almost chronic labour demand, makes nursing an easy way for females with low educational attainment in need for a job. The census data are insufficient to elucidate which of both explanations that is the most adequate. It is necessary to turn to life histories, as we did, to learn about the myriad of causal factors that intervene in human behaviour, and about the direction of causation at each stage of the life cycle.

In the process of interviewing we collected data on the life histories of nurses along three dimensions; a) family-starting with the family of origin and proceeding to the present day family; b) school-starting at the end of primary school (about 12-13 years); c) work-starting with the first entrance into the labour market.

We also collected data on the productive and reproductive activities conducted by nurses and other members of the household in a typical weekday (a brief time-budget report). It was in this process of interviewing that we were able to elucidate some of the queries posed by the census data.

Most of the thirty female nurses we interviewed did not enter the occupation for 'vocational reasons' but looking for a quick economic solution through a stable and permanent job, with permanent labour demand. At the time of entering nursing, the majority of these females were recently divorced or in the process of becoming divorced, with small children, single mothers or married to an unemployed husband, all with an urgent need for a safe income.

That is the story of Paula. She started working during school vacations at her uncle's office, when she was 15, she got married and left the labour market at 19. When she was 26, married and with two children (aged 5 and 7 years), realizing that her marriage was in danger, she considered entering nursing. She got a scholarship and took a course in auxiliary nursing in a school near her home. Right after graduation she started working in a hospital.

It is also the story of Martha who used to help her mother sewing clothes at home for a small garment factory since she was 15 and until she was 21. Then she married and soon after-

ward she got pregnant. When she was 28, with two small children (aged 3 and 6) her husband abandoned her for a cousin. All of a sudden she found herself in charge of her children and started working in anything and everything. She ironed shirts in a garment factory, sewed and knitted at home, worked for some hours a day as a domestic servant while her mother took care of the children. But all these jobs were unstable. At 32 she studied auxiliary nursing and nine months later she graduated and immediately got a job in a hospital<sup>9</sup>.

All non-spouse auxiliary nurses we interviewed were living in extended and composite households as a surviving strategy. They brought their mothers, fathers, old uncles or aunts to live with them or else a 15 or 16 year old boarder, a neighbour's nephew, to take care of the house and the children. It seems that the incomplete nuclear type of households is not viable for working women with small children except as a temporary arrangement, or until the household incorporates an economically active kin able to share domestic responsibilities, or until they return to their home of origin.

We have presented here a series of empirical findings that all highlight the complexity of female labour behaviour. To explain the dynamics of the labour force, it is not enough to focus on education, life-cycle stages, marital status, or the presence or absence of children per se. There are many other determinants that enter the scene such as the composition of the household (presence or absence of spouse, other income earners, children of different ages, other members who supply either money or domestic help). In addition individual motivations, cultural norms and orientations regarding the feminine and masculine roles within the family and in society as a whole. They do not act in isolation but in interaction, and they do not act in one unique causal direction, but at times they are causes and at times they are effects. This is why more than a decade ago we wrote:

In spite of the numerous studies available on the relation between fertility and female labour force participation, not only the direction of the relation remains

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<sup>9</sup> The story of male entrance in nursing is not linked to separation and divorce, or to losing a wife income-provider. It is not an enforced return to the labour market. Male nurses have not abandoned the labour market after marriage and the birth of the first child. Most males interviewed entered nursing looking for a safe and permanent job, wishing to abandon manual work, to advance on the social ladder or to increase their income.

unclear but even its very existence is still a matter of debate. Though the evidences of a negative relation are numerous, those of no relation are not to be overlooked. (Wainerman 1981)

(We still do not know) ... whether women who enter the labour force tend to reduce the number of children or else whether there is a selection process in operation by which women with a small number of children tend to have higher participation levels because they have more time available, have less social restrictions, wish to compensate a personal 'deficit', or for some other reason. (Wainerman 1983)

This lack of clarity and the abundance of contradictory findings is partly due to methodological reasons – heterogeneity of concepts, of indicators, of universes studied – and partly to the adoption of a simplistic analytical approach to study a phenomenon which calls for a complex holistic one. For it is not only the sheer number of children which affects the probability a woman has to enact the role of worker (in the same sense of member of the labour force), but also their age, the overall composition of the domestic unit, the 'convenience of work'<sup>10</sup>, and also the culturally valued behaviours and expectations regarding the role of mother, the sexual division of labour prevalent in society, etc. (Wainerman 1981)

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<sup>10</sup> A concept proposed by Darian to qualify jobs in terms of: at or away from home, requiring flexible or rigid hours, part-time or full-time regime.

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# Children as a resource: Implication of inheritance law and practice for population dynamics

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## 1 Introduction

It is the intention of this paper to illustrate one aspect of the complexity of population dynamics in Zimbabwe by referring to a single legal issue, that of inheritance. It is not in any way suggested that inheritance laws and practice act in isolation, or that the influence of inheritance on population dynamics can be fully understood without considering other influencing factors. Instead, I am suggesting that inheritance law and practice is one aspect of a culture which is increasingly ambivalent toward children as a resource and that this ambivalence may have an influence on population dynamics.

The Women and Law in Southern Africa Research Trust is an organization which does research on women's legal rights in six countries of Southern Africa: Zimbabwe, Zambia, Swaziland, Mozambique, Lesotho and Botswana. Every two years WLSA members in the six countries choose a topic which is considered relevant to women's legal status, plan a research project on that topic, and conduct the research at the national level in each country. The research results are then analysed at the regional level for regional trends and national differences. In our 1992-3 phase of research, we have chosen the topic of inheritance. Because we are still at the stage of analysing the data at the national level, I will not attempt to draw regional conclusions, but have chosen one of our countries, Zimbabwe, as an example of the complexity of the inheritance situation and its implications for population dynamics.

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