

When in the World are Women?

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About 1860, when she was in her mid-thirties, my great-grandmother sailed from England to Australia with her husband and four or five children, despite her mother's apprehensions that this was a dangerous move. She had three more children in Sydney – the last, my grandmother, when she was forty. Child-bearing and -rearing occupied a great portion of her life. What else she did I do not know, but taking regular care of elderly parents was not part of her life's experience.

My grandmother, born in 1865, spent most of her life in one area of Sydney. She married at about the age of twenty-five and had four children, never working outside the home. Her husband's income was always small and social services were limited. At the end of his working life, faced with financial and health problems and the onset of the 1930s Depression, she and my grandfather came to live with my recently married parents and their baby son. She remained in this extended family till she died at the age of eighty-one. Born when she was seventy-two, I experienced her as an important companion of my childhood, but as an old woman who virtually never left the house and whom we did not leave there alone for more than a few hours.

My mother, born in 1901, has had yet a different life course and geography. Leaving school at the age of fourteen, she became a

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“comptometrist” with a firm of accountants, working until her marriage at twenty-eight. She had two children – a son when she was twenty-nine and a daughter when she was thirty-five. Caring simultaneously for her parents, husband, and children, weathering hard times in the Depression, and living on her husband’s modest income till she was widowed at fifty-nine, her spatial world was mainly limited to the neighbourhood and to those places she could reach on foot or by public transport. Then, as a widow, with a state pension and benefits, some support from her children, and years of experience as a careful money manager, she was financially able as well as motivated to take some vacations, visiting relatives outside Sydney and me in the United States, thus widening her world and acquiring new experience’s for later memory. At the age of eighty-eight, no longer able to live alone, she moved to a ‘hostel’ in an outer suburb of Sydney, partially subsidized by church and state agencies, where, with other women (and a few men) mostly in their eighties and nineties, she receives assistance in daily living. Her space is primarily one room, her view mostly open land. She feels isolated.

Like my great-grandmother, I moved across the world, though as a single woman, at the age of twenty-four. Unlike my forebears, I obtained considerable education, the beneficiary of a variety of state scholarships and institutional support from the age of eleven. Like them, I married in my late twenties. Unlike them, I had no children. Also unlike them, I support myself financially, now live alone, and travel widely nationally and internationally for work and pleasure. Unlike my great-grandmother, I am able to visit my family almost every year. But, living in the United States, I cannot anticipate the significant state support for my old age which my mother has received, nor the family care that was my grandmother’s.

As I work on this book, reflection on the life experiences of the women in my family brings home to me how generation and historical context, changing fertility patterns, class position and class mobility, state policies and personal motivations intersect with the geographies of women’s lives, constraining choices and providing options. As a daughter, I regret that my mother, at ninety, does not have the company and family care her mother experienced. As a middle-aged woman, I value the chances I have had and the choices I have made to create a different geography and to try to share with others some aspects of women’s collective experience.

J.M.

My own reflections on the life course cross space rather than time, revealing my “having to take into account the simultaneity and extension

of events and possibilities” (Berger, 1974, 40, as cited in Soja, 1989, 22). As I contemplate my relationships with and to the women in rural Sudan with whom I lived for a year while conducting fieldwork on children’s learning and knowledge, the socially constructed nature of each aspect of the life course becomes more vivid.

When I went to Howa I was nearly twenty-seven years old and in a long-term relationship with a man. Settling in a couple of months before my [partner] arrived I lived with Leila, a sixteen-year-old school-leaver from [a small Sudanese] city who had just come to Howa to teach reading, writing and basic home science to the women. I was her first student. Despite having had my own household for almost ten years, my skills were next to useless in the face of charcoal stoves, dirt floors, distant water supplies and handfuls of goat meat. I was grateful to learn how to be an efficient and clean homemaker from this teenager living away from her mother for the first time.

At first I felt an affinity with other young married women, thinking that we were at the same stage in our lives except that they had young children. I soon realized that most of them were nineteen or twenty years old. Women of my own age already had upwards of four children, some as old as ten or eleven. Becoming aware of these disjunctures in our lives, I understood why everyone in Howa found it inordinately amusing that someone would postpone childbearing to complete a university degree and, given my advancing years, called upon me repeatedly to explain my lack of children. They elicited and listened to my explanation with a mixture of amusement and pity, which did not stop them from questioning me closely on other occasions about birth control.

In recent years as I have written about my work in Sudan (and entered my mid-thirties) it has been unnerving to realize that one of the women I considered a mother to me was all of thirty-seven years of age. At the same age as I (finally) began to feel like a ‘grown-up’ – degree completed, professional position secured, seriously considering having children – my fictive ‘mother’ had completed her family – married to the family patriarch, her youngest child sixteen; already a grandmother. She has made it clear to me that the family would prefer me to return with a baby than with more books. (I suspect my real mother might be in on this particular plot as well.)

These intersections point at once to the ties between biological life stages and their social construction. They also suggest the latitude in timing (and spacing) of life course stages, depending upon access to particular resources, and their interdependence on the choices and practices of those with whom we share our lives. These issues and

questions connect production and reproduction, crossing public and private spheres of material social practice.

Clearly my life choices were in part framed by my access to educational resources and facilitated by both reproductive freedom and the health and economic independence of my parents. My particular choices have certainly attenuated aspects of the life stage associated with young adulthood. Yet the organization of and articulation between production and reproduction in the United States remain rooted in a sociospatial and political-economic structure that is not supportive of combining work in both spheres. Elements of the constraints of this structure came home to me repeatedly in Sudan, as I witnessed both the extended family in operation and the closer convergence of the spaces of production and reproduction which freed parents from full-time child care and supported their participation in other activities.

I witnessed this most poignantly in an occurrence that reveals again some of the cross-currents in the life course as constituted in different social, cultural and economic settings. Towards the end of my stay in Sudan, Medina, one of the women closest to me, had a stroke and died, pregnant at thirty-four. The family was, of course, devastated by her death, as was I, but what made it remarkable was the way the extended family structure sustained her immediate family, which included seven children from two to seventeen years of age, through the loss. This helped fill in the yawning gaps of her absence, even for her youngest children, who had their father, sisters, brothers, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins in the same household compound. A similar loss in the United States is generally much more destabilizing to the family, requiring, for example, family members to move house, enormous investments in family time at the expense of outside work activities, and/or great financial outlays.

When I returned to Howa a few years later, Medina's oldest daughter, by that time fifteen, was nine months pregnant. When she went into labour, all the women of her family were with her during an arduously long night that ended in a stillbirth. I, twice her age, still childless, in some ways her 'fictive mother,' sat at her side and thought of Medina.

These reflections bring home the diversity in women's experiences across space, time, class and culture, but also distil some of the structural similarities on which they pivot. Theorizing across these geographical settings may enable us to identify and examine some of the underlying processes within and against which women construct their lives.

C.K.

As Western feminist scholarship began to mature in the 1980s, attention turned increasingly to the significance of context in shaping women's lives and to the intersection of gender with other forms of difference, especially race, ethnicity and class. Reminded by women in other parts of the world that their experiences and visions are not encompassed by Western models, and as geographers who believe in the importance of place in people's lives, we were struck by international data assembled in the mid-1980s which revealed that one-third of the world's female population is under fifteen years of age and that this proportion reaches 45 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa (Sivard, 1985, Table 1). Likewise, we were reminded that female life expectancy varies widely geographically – the difference between the highest and lowest countries is a startling forty-seven years (Sivard, 1985, 24). Interest in the geographic meanings of these demographic variations, together with our own research on children (Katz) and older women (Monk), stimulated us to try to go beyond the body of feminist work in geography (and many other fields) which largely addresses the lives of women in their middle years, especially those given over to child-bearing and -rearing, and which generally keeps separate the experiences of women in First World and Third World contexts.

[...]

In this [essay] we will first present some basic demography, then review concepts that we have found useful in illuminating women's changing geographies—their uses of space, their relationships to place, and the ways in which place and space constrain and offer opportunities over women's life course.

The Ages of Women: Contemporary World Patterns

Though Shakespeare's "Seven Ages of Man" has been widely quoted over the centuries since its writing, his categories do not speak to women's lives, nor to the historical and cross-cultural diversity of experiences. Indeed, defining life in terms of a set of "stages," especially if these are linked to chronological ages, is fraught with difficulty, especially if we adopt a comparative perspective. Comanches, for example, have been reported as identifying five stages, the Kikuyu six for males and eight for females, the Andaman Islanders twenty-three for men and the Incas ten (Falk *et al.*, cited in Chaney, 1990, 43). If we recognize that a woman's life expectancy at birth is as low as 32-3 years in Kampuchea, Sierra Leone and Afghanistan but over seventy-eight years in France, Japan and Switzerland, we can hardly assume that "stages" will be closely linked to chronological age or be experienced in universal ways. Yet we generally ignore these differences in research on women's lives, assuming in some fundamental way that "a mother is a mother is a mother."

Chronological age by itself does not define the roles and statuses a woman may have, the work she may do, or the timing of marriage, childbearing or attainment of varying degrees of power in the family and society. Nevertheless, some understanding of the demography of women, country by country, does help us to identify how certain

of their activities, such as caring for children or the elderly, will vary in salience across geographic contexts. Thus we will review the distribution of women around the world on the basis of age, using three broad categories: 0-14 years, 15-64 years and sixty-five years and over. We chose these categories mainly because that is how the data are available, but we also consider them of some consequence, despite the qualifications we have already expressed.

The contrast in the population profiles of rich and poor countries is well known. Underdeveloped nations, almost without exception, are characterized by a triangular profile, the wide base indicating many more young than old people; while wealthy industrial countries, with similar numbers in each age cohort, have more symmetrical and narrow silhouettes, signifying enduring patterns of low fertility. The first form signals not only higher dependency ratios, but portends continued population growth as growing numbers reach fertility. The latter profile connotes stabilized population growth and more of a balance between dependants and caretakers, although growing numbers of older people mark a new form of dependence, with dramatic life course implications, as Ruth Fincher [1993] discusses [...]. Figures 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3 map these differences. Given our concern with the life course of women, we want to highlight some of the gendered short- and long-term consequences of these distributions.

We emphasize that it is not population size which creates problems; rather that it is the global and national distribution of wealth, power and other resources which makes any particular demographic situation problematic or not. The global recession and stupendous levels of Third World debt, for example, have stymied virtually all advances in education and health in these countries. Under circumstances of growing impoverishment and debt, many nations of Africa, Asia, South America and the Caribbean must work harder just to stay in place, given both the overall numbers of children and youth, and high rates of population growth.

There are sobering indications that they are failing. For example, since the Second World War the numbers of six- to eleven-year-olds not in school in the underdeveloped countries declined steadily, reaching a plateau in 1986 at 50 million, since then they have increased significantly for the first time in four decades, to 60 million (UNICEF, 1990). Likewise, in the least developed countries (characterized by UNICEF as those with the highest rates of under-five mortality), the percentage of those enrolled in first grade who completed primary school dropped from 49 per cent in 1980-4, to 40 per cent in 1985-7. Among the next cluster of countries – largely in Africa and Asia, with a small number in South America – there was a decline from 70 to 64 per cent over the same periods. These trends, which point to economic difficulties at both the national and household levels, mean, of course, that as we reach the end of the millennium, the number of adult illiterates will grow and overall literacy rates will rise more slowly throughout much of the world.

As advances in education and health are slowed or reversed, the consequences for females and thereby society as a whole are critical. The very countries with the highest numbers of young people have the fewest resources – human, financial, infrastructural – for providing education or improving health. There are no easy conclusions or comparisons, however. Two brief examples, amplified below, illustrate this point. First, the availability of education does not correlate with whether or not girls are enrolled at similar levels to boys. Some countries with low levels of enrolment reach equal rates for both sexes, others with high levels of enrolment educate the majority of boys but few girls. The reasons for these differences reflect the intersection of political economy, cultural ideologies concerning education, specific sociospatial patterns and cultural ecologies and the gender division of labour at all scales. These interrelationships, which connect global with local processes, are dynamic and context-specific. Some of their determinants and consequences for particular sites and populations are explored [...] by Janet Townsend [1993] and Cindi Katz [1993]. Second, evidence is mounting that in the face of scarce resources, the preference for male children is exacting an enormous toll in female infanticide, abortion and neglect that results in death. However, these practices appear to be largely limited to Asia, where they are often exacerbated by strict government controls on family size. Despite devastating poverty, this phenomenon has not been witnessed in Africa or South America and the Caribbean (Kristof, 1991).

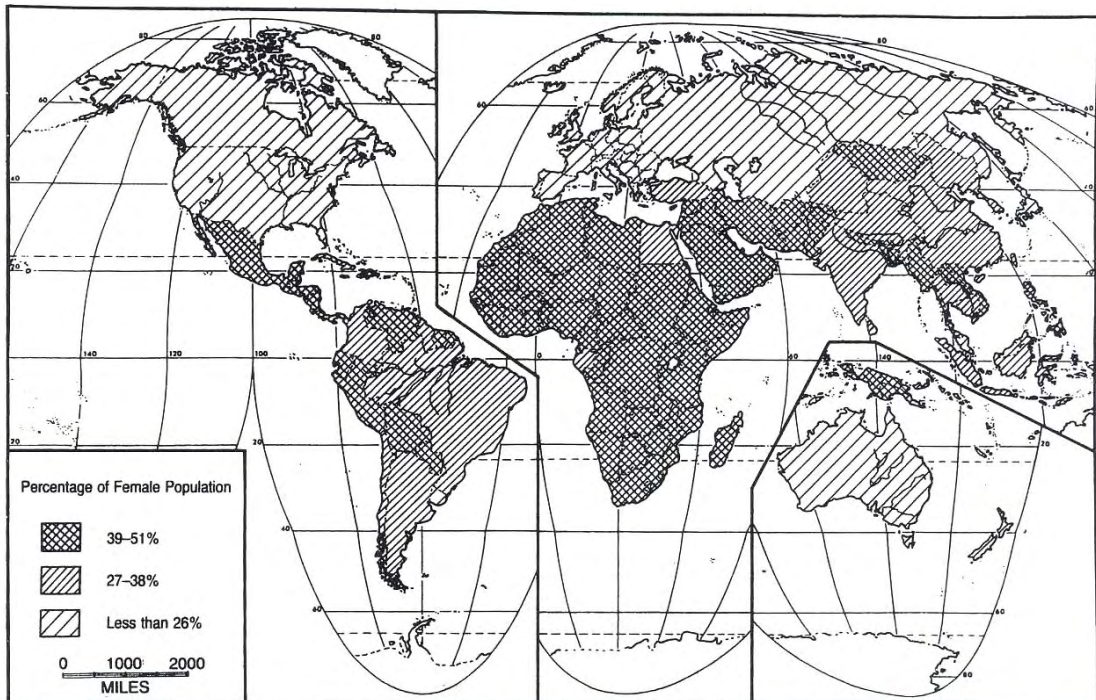


Figure 1.1: Global distribution of the female population aged 0-14 years.

Having briefly identified some of the problems that confront females at the beginning of the life course in the contemporary world, we now examine the spatial variations in their expression. In many parts of the world inequalities between males and females in their access to schooling are long-standing. Among those countries with high populations under fifteen years and low levels of overall primary school enrolment, some, such as Guinea, Somalia and Burkina Faso, exhibit serious disparities between boys' and girls' enrolment. Elsewhere, enrolments are low but the disparity between males and females is less; among these countries are Mali, Uganda and Haiti. Others, such as Tanzania, Malawi, Rwanda and El Salvador have moderate levels of primary enrolment (between 47 and 65 per cent of school-aged children) with no significant differences between male and female enrolment. Several countries in Africa, Asia and South America with large numbers of young people are characterized by relatively high levels of enrolment. Some of these, such as Benin, Nepal and Togo, exhibit disparities in boys' and girls' enrolment. This pattern, which favours boys, does not occur in any South American or Caribbean countries for which data are available – these countries generally have high rates of enrolment and parity between boys and girls. Among other areas where this pattern prevails, Zimbabwe and Sri Lanka stand out with 100 per cent of both sexes enrolled in primary school. In Syria the figures are 100 and 94 per cent, in Indonesia 99 and 97 per cent and in Nicaragua 74 and 79 per cent (all figures for 1986-8, UNICEF, 1990). In countries characterized by smaller youth ratios, enrolment figures are generally high and relatively even between boys and girls.

The life course implications of these different situations should be apparent. Not only will girls who are educated have different skills, as they confront fast-changing economies and sociocultural situations which may alter their traditional modes of work, but they will be better prepared, as many studies of maternal literacy have demonstrated, to support the education of future generations. It is of serious concern, then, that over the past decade, long before universal primary education has been achieved, the rate of increase in female enrolment slowed throughout the Third World. In Africa, for example, it was 9.1 per cent between 1975 and 1980, compared with just 2.7 per cent between 1980 and 1988; in South America and the Caribbean it fell from 3.9 to 2.2 per cent over the same periods. In Asia the decline was negligible (from 1.2 to 1.0 per cent), but the rates of growth were minimal in the face of conditions in which 43 per cent of the total enrolment was female ([UNICEF], 1990). These reversals in progress are illustrative of the historically and geographically specific mutual determinations between the global political economy, development economics, cultural values and the division of labour. The particular constellation of these factors in any location will have a substantial bearing upon life course decisions, as well as upon the articulation of these with larger sociocultural and political-economic structures.

It remains the case that in much of the Third World, especially in the poorest countries of Africa and Asia, only a small minority of children attend secondary school. Just a fraction of these are female. As we discuss in more detail below, many

women in these countries marry and begin bearing children in their teenage years. This pattern exacerbates extant health problems, because infant health and survival are compromised both by early pregnancy and with each birth from the same mother. Low birthweight babies (two kilograms or less) are more common among teenage mothers, for example. A study in the United States revealed that 13.8 per cent of the babies born to mothers under age fifteen had low birthweights, whereas among mothers of fifteen to nineteen years of age, 9.3 per cent were low birthweight; and among mothers of twenty to twenty-four years of age, the figure dropped to 7 per cent (Population Reference Bureau, 1989). A study from Brazil, one of the countries with moderate numbers of births to mothers younger than fifteen years of age, revealed infant mortality rates of 124 per 1,000 live births among mothers under eighteen years of age. For mothers between eighteen and twenty-four years old, the figure drops by a third. While the same study found an increase in infant mortality with each new birth, the increase was substantial at the seventh birth and after. Similarly, the shorter the interval between births, the higher the infant mortality; under two years the figure is 138, while with a four year interval, it drops to 50 per 1,000 live births (UNICEF, 1990). These figures reveal some of the ways in which socially constructed life-course patterns, such as age of marriage and child-bearing, have serious implications for health and education in general.

Available statistics on infant mortality reveal, in the main, slightly higher rates for boys than girls in almost all countries. Likewise, female life expectancy at birth exceeds males' almost everywhere. Available data on malnutrition are not reported by sex, but evidence from many parts of the world indicates that males continue to be favoured in the distribution of resources, whether this be food, healthcare or maternal attention. When resources are scarce, we may expect girls to suffer more than boys. Recent demographic reports suggest widespread and substantial "excess female mortality." Girls are being aborted, killed and neglected at staggering rates in several regions, and these practices are showing up increasingly in skewed population ratios. In India and China alone, conservative estimates point to over 52 million missing females (that is, the number of females that should be alive according to expected population ratios and rates of population growth). A Swedish study suggested that in countries without strong patterns of discrimination, about 130 infant boys die for every 100 infant girls. In China, however, only about 112 boys die for every 100 girls (Johansson and Nygren, 1991; Kristof, 1991). Here it is calculated that among infants under a year old, 44,000 female deaths annually result from unequal treatment (Kristof, 1991). Other Asian countries are experiencing this phenomenon as well, but it remains uncommon in Africa, South America and the Caribbean. The preference for boys, which is already having a pronounced effect on the sex ratios in much of Asia, has profound implications for the future. Not only will ratios of males to females be much higher, thus altering marriage, sexual and childbearing patterns, but given that throughout the world most of the "caring work" is done by females, it remains to be seen who will look after everyone. This trend illustrates, in an extreme and disturbing way, how the work of production and reproduction over the life course is profoundly

altered by everyday material social practices and how these are articulated with larger social relations of production and reproduction at all scales.

In virtually all countries the years between fifteen and sixty-four include those in which women carry their maximum responsibilities for productive and reproductive work, generating income and caring for partners, children and the elderly. The proportion of the female population available for such work varies considerably among countries, however (Figure 1.2). The percentages are highest in eastern and western Europe, the United States and Canada, Australia and New Zealand, China and Japan; they are lowest in most African countries, parts of the Middle East and Central America. Intermediate values occur in much of South America and the Caribbean and south and south-east Asia.

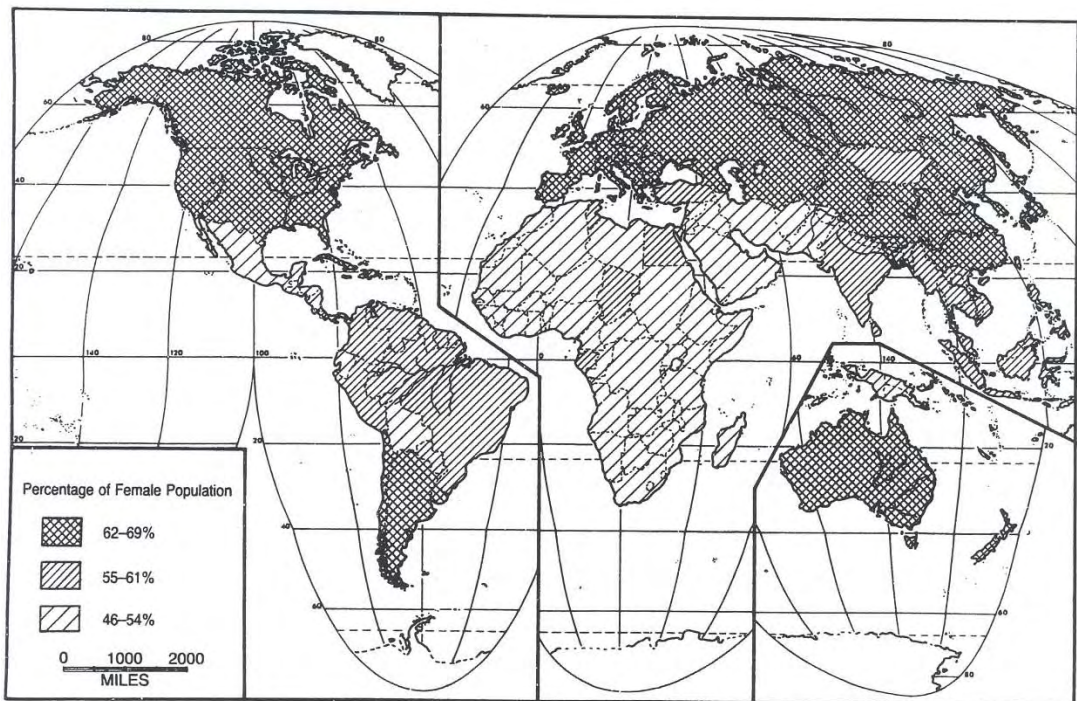


Figure 1.2: Global distribution of the female population aged 15-64 years

To some extent, these differences can be linked to the nature of economic development and, indeed, lead one to ask how development is related to the availability of women for work. Yet this distinction is simplistic, for the distribution also reflects differences in fertility, child and maternal mortality and women's longevity which are shaped by cultural values as well as political-economic structures and socio-economic practices, reflected for example in the quality of healthcare afforded women or the demand for household labour. Perhaps the most important implication of the distribution is an obvious one: the countries with the highest proportions of children (Figure 1.1) are, by definition, those with the lowest proportions of women available for productive and reproductive work. Even though

children may assist with work, this circumstance surely contributes to the long hours of work and small amount of time available for leisure, sleep and other physiological needs that have been documented for women in some African and Asian countries (Seager and Olson, 1986, 13).

How women experience these years also varies widely among countries. Not only does the number of children (and women's access to contraception and abortion) differ widely (Seager and Olson, 1986, 79), so too do the age at which child-bearing begins, the age of marriage and the frequency of marriage and divorce. A few examples illustrate the extent of the differences. Data on fertility indicate that the proportion of all births to teenagers is as low as 1 per cent in Japan and 4 per cent in Egypt, 13 per cent in the United States and Thailand, 20 per cent in El Salvador and 29 per cent in Cuba (Population Reference Bureau, 1989). By age twenty, an average of 50 per cent of women are married across an array of African countries, compared with 38 per cent in South America and the Caribbean (Population Reference Bureau, 1989). The average annual number of divorces reaches over 20 per 1,000 married couples in the United States but stands at between 5 and 10 per 1,000 in several eastern and western European countries, among them Finland, Hungary and (formerly West) Germany and some South American ones such as Venezuela and Uruguay. Rates fall to below 2.5 per 1,000 in Costa Rica, Ecuador, Italy and Sri Lanka. What patterns of marriage or non-marriage mean in women's lives, however, requires interpretation within specific historical and geographic contexts, as Lydia Pulsipher [1999] illustrates [...].

The ways in which women arrange for or are assisted with caring for their children and elderly family members also differ markedly from country to country. While expectations that the mother will assume full or primary care for all dependants are pervasive (though see Pulsipher [1993]), the extent to which the State and other institutions provide support varies not only by country, but also by class, ethnicity and location within countries, as Ruth Fincher [1993] and Damaris Rose [1993] make clear [...]. Seager and Olson (1986) indicate that as many as 37 per cent of pre-school children in Sweden are in day-care centres, compared with 15 per cent in Canada, and less than 1 per cent in Nicaragua. While it has long been recognized that women juggle their schedules both over the long term and over much shorter intervals, to cope with their multiple roles as workers in and out of the labour force, the spatial aspects of these temporal gymnastics have rarely been addressed. Our studies show some of the ways in which women of all classes adjust their spatio-temporal arrangements, from the selection of places of employment and residence to the organization of their daily movements, in order to cope with their care-taking responsibilities (see [...] Pratt and Hanson [1993], Fagnani [1993], Rosenbloom [1993], Rose [1993] and Christensen [1993]).

Women's participation in productive work also varies widely geographically. Global patterns of women's labour are well summarized by Momsen and Townsend (1987). The inadequacies of international statistical data on women's work are widely

known (see, for example, Beneria, 1982), especially as they fail to deal with unpaid and informal sector activities and part-time employment. Within the limitations of these data, however, Seager and Olson have identified an array of countries, especially in Scandinavia and eastern Europe, where more than 65 per cent of women aged fifteen and over are working for wages or trade; and others, especially in the Middle East, where their documented labour force participation falls below 10 per cent (1986, 16). Age of entry into the workforce and withdrawal from it, however, also vary considerably by geographic context, as Janet Henshall Momsen [1993], Janet Townsend [1993], Geraldine Pratt and Susan Hanson [1993] and Kathleen Christensen [1993] reveal [...].

The geographic distribution of older women (Figure 1.3) around the world in the early 1980s presented a simpler pattern than that of the younger age groups. Countries clearly have either high or low proportions of women over age sixty-five. Globally, these women account for seven per cent of the female population, but proportions range from 2 or 3 per cent in most countries of sub-Saharan Africa to 16-19 per cent in most of western Europe (Sivard, 1985, Table 1).

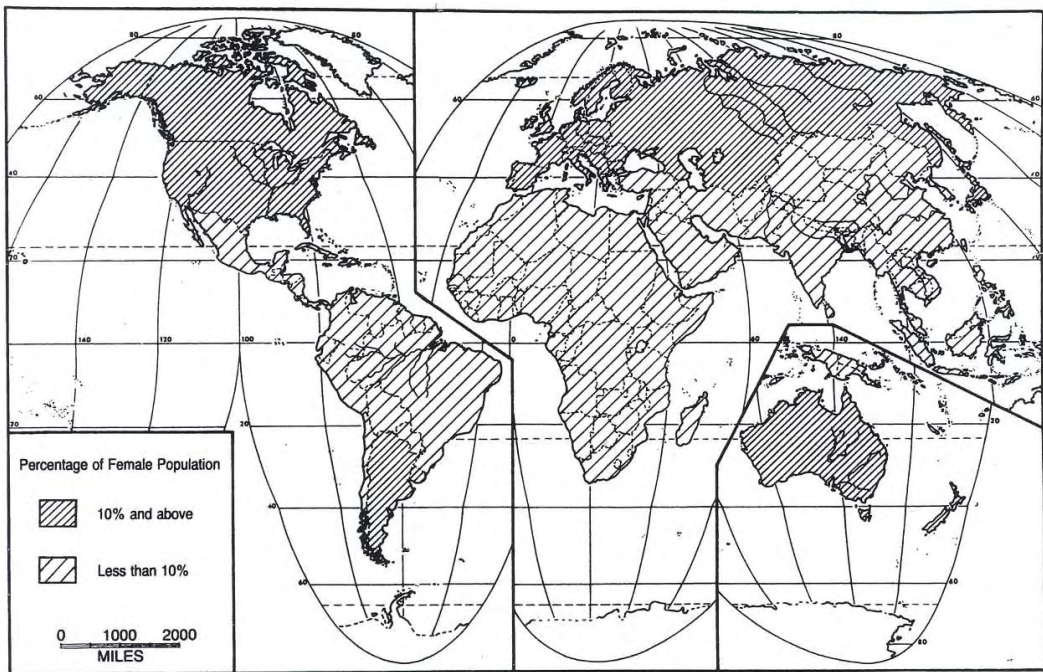


Figure 1.3: Global distribution of the female population aged 65 years and over.

By the twenty-first century, however, the distribution of older women will be somewhat different because of current patterns of fertility and changes in life expectancy world-wide. Although most African countries will continue to have low proportions of older women, this group will increase in importance in South and Central America, the Caribbean and in China. Estimates for South and Central

America and the Caribbean region as a whole are that women who turn sixty in the year 2000 can expect, on the average, to live an additional twenty years (Anstee, 1990, 3). Already the proportions of older women in the populations of Argentina, Barbados and Uruguay are comparable to those found in the United States, Canada and Japan. Although in several Latin American countries – for example, Bolivia, Peru, Venezuela and the Dominican Republic – the proportions of women over age sixty-five in the early 1980s were similar to those in African nations, fertility is generally lower (except in Bolivia), and in many cases, life expectancy already more than ten years higher (Sivard, 1985, Table 1). Of course, to understand changes in population structure we also have to examine immigration trends, especially in the Caribbean.

Unfortunately, we know relatively little about the experiences of older women around the world, even in the European Community, where one-third of the female population is over fifty years of age, 12 million women are over age seventy-five and 2.5 million are over age eighty-five (*Network News*, 1990, 9). These data remind us that older women represent an increasingly diversified group with different needs; those in their late fifties and sixties may still be in the labour force, whereas those in their late eighties and nineties are likely to be frail and to require considerable assistance to manage their daily lives. [...] Ruth Fincher [1993], Sandra Rosenbloom [1993] and Patricia Sachs [1993] discuss in detail some of these differences in experience.

The increasing numbers of the oldest groups are especially marked. For example, while the population aged 55-64 grew by 20 per cent in Spain and Italy between 1950 and 1980, the number over eighty-five increased by more than 100 per cent. Most remarkable has been the expansion of the proportions of people living into their eighties and nineties. Since two-thirds to three-quarters of those over eighty-five in most western European countries are women, it is clearly important to learn more about the experiences and needs of very elderly women (*Network News*, 1990, 9). Not only are high proportions of elderly women likely to be widowed, but more than 10 per cent of women currently aged fifty-five and over in many of the countries of the European Community (and nearly one-quarter in Ireland) have never married (*Network News*, 1990 10). How do these older women support themselves? What roles do they fulfil? How do families, the State and other institutions assist them? What is the nature of their geographies and how do these relate to their well-being? What are the differences within the region? A recent report on the *Social and Economic Situation of Older Women in Europe*² suggests some answers to these questions. For example, labour force participation by women aged 55-64 varies markedly among countries, from a low of 16 per cent in Belgium and the Netherlands to a high of 50 per cent in

² The report was prepared for the Federation for Policy on Ageing in the Netherlands and the Age Concern Institute for Gerontology in the United Kingdom by Marianne Coopmans, Anne Harrop and Marijke Hermans-Huiskes. Its major findings are summarized in *Network News: Global Link for Older and Midlife Women* 5 (1) Spring/Summer, 1990, pp. 9-15.

Denmark. Whether these employed women are likely to be married, divorced, widowed or never to have married also varies among the countries. Though older married women are generally less likely to be employed than unmarried women of the same age, in Belgium, Greece, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom it is the widowed and divorced women in the 50-64-year-old age group who are the least frequently employed. The kind of work that women do also varies among the countries. Agriculture is still an important source of employment for older women in southern Europe and Ireland, for example, though less so elsewhere. Economic changes are also modifying older women's employment prospects. Growth in the service sector and in part-time work seems to be associated with their increasing labour force participation in Denmark, the Netherlands and Portugal, though the work does not pay well.

The ability of older women to manage their everyday lives clearly relates to both their incomes and their health, with the latter especially affecting their geographic mobility and capacity to fulfil their needs. Surveys reported in the European study note that poor health inhibits women's ability to climb stairs, go shopping, use public transportation or walk to the nearest medical facility unaided. Sandra Rosenbloom [1993] addresses similar problems among older women in the United States [...] Though European Community and British Commonwealth nations generally provide national health insurance and health service schemes, differences remain in local provision, especially between rural and urban areas, and are heightened as emphasis shifts from institutional to community-based care. The consequences of this unevenness and some implications of elder-care policies for middle-aged women care-givers are addressed [...] by Ruth Fincher [1993], who writes of the situation in an Australian metropolitan area.

Adequate housing for older women is another issue identified in the European study. Frequently their older homes lack adequate amenities, especially in such places as the rural areas of Italy and Greece. Some of the dimensions of the housing situation of older women in a rural community in the United States are dealt with by Patricia Sachs [1993] who describes how women and their husbands have taken steps to improve their housing and to sustain a supportive neighbourhood.

The increasing numbers of older women in many Latin American and Caribbean countries in principle have access to various forms of state support, especially pensions. Changes in the global economy, however, threaten the abilities of debt-burdened countries to meet these obligations. Further, because coverage is generally limited to those in the paid labour force, the many women who are agricultural workers, domestic workers and informal sector traders are ineligible for pensions. Because coverage, age of eligibility, benefits and patterns of labour force participation differ among the countries of the region, the results for women also vary. For example, in the early 1980s, just under 25 per cent of El Salvadoran women were employed in positions with social insurance coverage, compared with almost 45 per cent of women in Barbados (Mesa-Lago, 1990, 9). These data refer to women

currently employed, however. Essays [...] by Janet Henshall Momsen [1993], Lydia Pulsipher [1993] and Janet Townsend [1993] address the survival strategies of women who are now elderly in Latin America and the Caribbean; among other things they combine their own labour, remittances from adult children and help from other kin or neighbours, or move to live with adult children who have migrated away from their home regions.

Whether women have the power, status and autonomy to secure an acceptable quality of life in their later years, as opposed to simply attaining longevity, is a difficult question to answer. In her review of literature on a range of pre-industrial societies, Chaney (1990) suggests that women had a greater degree of power in the family and community in pastoral, nomadic and hunting and gathering societies than in agricultural and industrial ones. Still, she notes that prestige and influence also had to be attained (rather than simply being bestowed on the basis of age) in these societies, especially through the exercise of creativity and initiative, principally in service to the community. [...]

Women's Geographies from a Life Course Perspective

In approaching the geographical experiences of women from a life course perspective, we are largely charting new territory. With few exceptions, feminist geographers have emphasized the behaviour, concerns and perceptions of women who are implicitly in the younger and middle years of adulthood, focusing on questions related to employment, the journey to work and childcare in their studies in Western societies and on the relationships between development and women's productive and reproductive work in Third World countries. They have paid almost no attention to the years of childhood and adolescence, and only a little more to the lives of older women.³

The larger multidisciplinary feminist literature provides more guidance in approaching our topic, though here again, studies which make the life course their central concern are relatively rare. Most notable is a collection of British essays (Allatt *et al.*, 1987), which brings together discussion of conceptual issues with case studies that cover various life stages, dealing with both private lives and structural issues. As we noted earlier, the interest in the diversity of women's experiences in the feminist literature has emphasized differences based in race, ethnicity and class, as well as sexual orientation and cultural context. Only recently have we seen the call to consider

³ Geographic studies of children have been reviewed by Hart (1983); studies of older women are reviewed in Zelinsky, Monk and Hanson (1982). Little has been added since that time. Though a small number of geographers continue to conduct research on topics related to ageing, this work often does not identify gender concerns, nor address feminist questions. Recent geographic research in the United States on ageing is summarized by Golant, Rowles and Meyer (1989).

all phases of the life course and development over the life span (Rosser, 1991). Rosser locates the neglect in the composition of feminist scholars. Not only have they been predominantly white, middle class and Western, they have also been relatively uniform in age (20-45). She suggests that only as women's studies scholars began to age have we seen any serious attention paid to issues facing older women, such as menopause, osteoporosis and healthcare and housing for older women.

Despite its gaps, the feminist literature does include some studies that incorporate a life course perspective in their consideration of the ways in which adult women develop and change. A number of these focus on women's experiences of midlife as these reflect social changes in the United States. The collection *Women in Midlife* (Baruch and Brooks Gunn, 1984), for example, includes essays on the influences of economic conditions, ideologies and the normative timing of marriage and childbearing on the problems women face, the quality of life they experience and the powers they assert. These essays also explore how other sources of difference (culture, race, cohort) interact with the phenomenon of midlife. Among other feminist works interpreting women's life course transitions are Mary Catherine Bateson's (1990) portraits of five "successful" women shaping their professional and personal lives as they confront losses and opportunities, and Myra Dinnerstein's (1992) study of married midlife women who have turned from homemaking to business and professional careers. She examines how they negotiate changing roles within the family as they develop new aspirations and self-images.

Returning to geography, this time to non-feminist literature, we find a few approaches of interest, though surprisingly little relevant empirical research. Population studies, largely in their examination of intra-urban residential mobility in North America, have long incorporated the concept of the family life cycle into their models.⁴ This work has two major limitations from the perspective of understanding the lives of contemporary women, however. First, it has generally proffered a culturally and temporally bound notion of family structure, and second, it has portrayed women only in the context of family relationships. Much more attention needs to be paid to the dynamic nature of household units, as Clare Stapleton suggested over a decade ago (1980), and women's lives also need to be situated in a wider array of relationships and contexts.

Geographic research on environmental perception and behaviour has also been sensitive to life stage variations (Aitken *et al.*, 1989; Saarinen, Sell and Husband, 1982), though as Janice Monk (1984) pointed out, the stages are treated discretely, with few efforts to examine transitions or connections between the various phases of childhood, adulthood and old age. A rare exception is the comparison by Graham Rowles (1981) of his own work on the elderly with Roger Hart's work on children, in which he concludes that older people's perceptions of their shrinking behavioural

⁴ See White *et al.* (1989) for a summary of recent work.

space does not represent the inverse of children's learning about their expanding spatial realm.

We had hoped that the Swedish time geographical studies initiated by Torsten Hagerstrand and his colleagues would provide us with more fully developed insights to approach our undertaking. Conceptually, this research acknowledges longitudinal perspectives as well as people's short-term daily needs to coordinate movements in time and space. But while there are theoretical explications [...] our search yielded only a few empirical studies which go beyond the daily scale. Among the exceptions are Hågerstrand's study of weekly and seasonal movements (1982) and of lifetime moves (1975) in rural communities in Sweden, and Solveig Martensson's (1977) analysis of the complex interplay between the developmental needs of children and the shifting time commitments of their parents' work.

Having identified relatively little to guide us in these literatures, we turned to the multidisciplinary research on the life course, drawing particularly on writing in developmental psychology, family history and sociology of the family. Though the questions and approaches in these fields differ in a number of ways from our own, most notably by their lack of interest in the spaces and places of women's lives, we nevertheless find their conceptual insights valuable. First we should comment on basic terminology. The long-standing and relatively common term "life cycle" is no longer widely used in this literature, especially in the United States. One reason for this retreat, Alice Rossi argues, is that "cycle" inappropriately implies multiple turns (1980). A second, less obvious, reason is that the concept is associated with earlier research that often linked life experience to a relatively fixed or inevitable series of biological stages and ages (Allatt *et al.*, 1987; Hareven and Adams, 1982; Rossi, 1980). Research that now emphasizes the diversity of experiences within an age group and the lack of clear associations between chronological age, perceptions and behaviour, has instead adopted the terms "life course" and "life span." The former is commonly used by sociologists and historians, the latter by psychologists (Neugarten, 1985; Rossi, 1980). This research is primarily concerned with the transitions that occur as people age; it explores their pathways through the various structures in the major role domains of life. These transitions are interpreted within the context of changing historical conditions. Because our interests are closer to those of the historians and sociologists than to those of psychologists, who focus more on individuals and the inner world, we have chosen to use the term "life course." With the British sociologists Allatt *et al.* (1987), however, we find some continuing value in the "ages and stages" idea, particularly as we recognize the importance of attending to demographic variations among women world-wide. Further, we are attracted by Bateson's recognition that women make many new beginnings in life, but in living new lives draw on their pasts even as they use them in new ways (1990). She invokes ecological concepts in proposing alternative ways of thinking about "composing a life," among them the notion of recycling. [...]

An important premise of the multidisciplinary literature is that change throughout the life course is based not only in biology, but in experiences of family, community and history. Since these experiences reflect multiple influences, which have interactive and cumulative effects, divergence among people increases over the life course (Campbell *et al.*, 1985; Featherman, 1983). It thus becomes important to examine the significance of prior experience on later life, both for individuals and for groups (Back, 1980). In this vein Ozawa (1989) identifies many of the causes of poverty among contemporary women in the United States in their educational and employment histories and in the ideologies about women's economic support that have prevailed during their lifetimes. From a developmental perspective, these past experiences do not determine present and future courses, but they shape the capacity for choice and constrain options.

Within this framework it is important to identify the cohort to which a woman belongs. Behaviours we associate with a specific life stage may more truly reflect the conditions through which a group has lived collectively, such as its access to education, than biological age. As Rossi (1980) has pointed out, much of what has been written about middle age in the United States is based on the particular histories of people born in the 1920s and 1930s, whose childhood and young adulthoods were affected by economic depression and war, in ways not shared by those now in middle age. In an interesting study of Italian women Saraceno (1991) demonstrates clearly how three recent cohorts of women reveal very different patterns of labour force participation, varying in terms of their age of entry into the market and continuity of employment. These differences reflect changes in gender ideologies, marriage laws, educational provision, fertility trends and restructuring of the Italian economy. Changing conditions have not only influenced employment experiences but also family roles and the psychological burdens each cohort bears as the women in them try to balance reproductive demands and their aspirations with the employment scene. Jeanne Fagnani [1993], Kathleen Christensen [1993] and Geraldine Pratt and Susan Hanson [1993] discuss these issues [...].

The Italian study highlights one of the more interesting questions for scholars concerned with women and the life course – assessing how the conjunction in timing (or synchronization) of diverse roles affects experience (Hareven, 1982). To understand the life course we need to be aware of both the issue of time, whether this is individual time, family time or historical time, and of the diversity of roles that women assume. Our examination of women's roles has to be extended so that we see them not only as mothers, wives and workers, but also in relation to other generations – as daughters, grandmothers, aunts and so on – and in domains outside the family and workplace, their wider community of friends as well as in relation to various social and political institutions (Lopata, 1987), which will vary in significance over the life course. As geographers, we further argue that the study of temporal and social circumstances needs to be extended to consideration of the spaces and places within

which women construct their lives. Bringing together these ideas, we have titled our project “full circles,” choosing a metaphor that refers to space as well as time.⁵

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⁵ Editors' note: The authors suggested to add this final sentence and make some minor changes in language to the original.

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