The Elgar Companion to Development Studies

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BOSERUP, ESTER (b. 1910)

Ester Boserup was a truly original scholar who challenged prevailing theories regarding agricultural change and population growth, and became the guru of the women and international development movement. She wove her examination of population, agriculture, and household labour distribution into a unified model that strengthened her analysis of the separate disciplines. More uniquely, she focused on the interplay of economic and non-economic factors in the process of social change, both today and in the past. By viewing human societies as dynamic relationships between natural, economic, cultural, and political structures, Boserup argued that global change could not be explained within the framework of a single discipline.

Boserup's model was first articulated in *The Conditions of Agricultural Growth: the Economics of Agrarian Change under Population Pressures*, published in 1965, where she postulates that population density compelled societies to invent new technologies in order to increase food production. She traces the intensification of agriculture from earliest times when hunters and gatherers began to cultivate the forests in order to provide a more reliable source of food. They slashed and burned the jungle, then planted crops among the stumps, utilizing the nutrients produced by the burn. As production fell, another plot was burned. Men prepared the plots and provided protection as women farmed using a stick to make a hole. Labour requirements were low, estimated at 15 hours per week for women, 14 hours per week for men. Women were thus

an important economic commodity; daughters were exchanged for a bride price paid by the husband's family both for her labour and her fertility.

As population increased and new lands became scarce, the length of time plots were left to fallow decreased and labour requirements increased as fallow periods were reduced from over 15 years to annual planting to multi-cropping. New technologies had to be invented to clear and till the land; draft animals fertilized the soil as they pulled the plough. She further emphasised that the division of labour within the family were assigned by age and sex, and this distribution varied across regions and cultures. Men began to work longer hours on the farm than women, though women continued to plant, weed, and harvest before the advent of modern machinery.

Agricultural change affected land-owning patterns, which evolved from communal or tribal control during slash and burn periods to individual ownership. Disparities of income began to appear; poorer families sent women and men to labour on the fields of the more wealthy. As migration patterns increased, racial discrimination grew both in the countryside and in the growing urban centres. Cities became a magnet for employment and education, enticing both rich and poor.

Boserup demonstrated the impact of colonialism on agriculture, noting that colonial enclave economies did not encourage increased agricultural output. Expatriates preferred the tastes of home**,** and shipping food by boat was also easier than transporting overland on bush roads, depressing local agriculture. Men's labour was sought, sometimes by force, to work on plantations growing export crops, as farms became more dependent on the labour of women who

produced food only for the family. At the same time, men's power over women and land resources was privileged, undermining many traditional rights of women.

Boserup expanded her model in 1970 in *Woman's Role in Economic Development.* She looked at the redistribution of labour between women and men that resulted from agricultural change, and how the reallocation of work affected women's status within the family. In slash and burn societies, women were the primary farmers; their labour as well as their reproductive value was indicated by the payment of bride price from the husband to her family. As men became dominant in agriculture, women's worth was primarily based on fertility. Bride price was replaced by dowry, a payment from the bride's family to that of the husband. With an increase in income differentiation, wealthier families could afford to remove their wives from field labour, a change that enhanced the family status but also restricted women's mobility.

This pattern continues today. In those areas where women farm and men can purchase their labour and where land use rights can be expanded, primarily in West Africa, polygamy continues. In Muslim areas where dowry is the rule, the incidence of polygamy is largely confined to the wealthy. In these areas of male farming, upper caste/status women are in seclusion but women from the lower classes frequently work as casual labourers. Because upper class women do not work in the fields casual labourers must replace them; the added cost to the household further depresses women's value and entitlements. This example makes clear that class hierarchies affect age and sex status relationships as well.

Boserup distinguished between female and male towns as she distinguished farming systems. Female towns are centred on markets where women dominate the trade. Male towns are of two types: they may have a surplus of men in the population or they may be towns where women are in seclusion and therefore unseen. A semi-male town is one where women dominate the traditional markets while the modern sector is exclusively the domain of men. Most towns include migrants of ethnicities whose cultures diverge regarding women's occupations.

Market towns trade both agricultural and non-agricultural commodities. Because historically women produced many of the household products they needed, increased opportunities for trade encouraged specialisation. Products may originate in rural areas but trading is done in towns, and women and men offer their tailoring and food at markets. Boserup called this activity the 'bazaar and service sector' which was a more focused concept than the more widely used residual category 'informal sector.' Her category is more accurate. When the International Labour Organisation (ILO) studies looked at the informal sector, they searched for small enterprises that hired workers. This classification effectively screens out most women or family run micro enterprises, such as street food vending, home-based work, or urban agriculture. Boserup noted that many women preferred such work to factory jobs because it more easily meshed with household responsibilities. This is also true of other economic activities that women can conduct from home.

Boserup's model has had significant impact on the interpretation of economic history, particularly the causal relationship between population and agricultural change. By insisting that population increase promoted the search for technological innovation that led to agricultural intensification,

she contradicts Malthus who argued that the world has a limited carrying capacity and too many people would outrun food availability. Rather, Boserup argues that low population density inhibits economic and agricultural growth. Although she championed the idea that humans adapt to population pressure, she recognises that the process alters institutions and age-race-sex hierarchies, changes that create new winners and new losers. In terms of environment, growing populations put pressure on resources, particularly land and water, and the new technologies that increase agricultural production often have a negative impact, such as chemical fertilizers and pesticides degrading the environment. Further, rapid technological change creates conflicts with national cultures through its radical influence on traditional ways of life: cultural attitudes and behaviour, which may have made sense in an earlier production system, lose their relevance.

Boserup has had a towering impact on the field of women in international development. Her book, with its reams of data, legitimised the scholarship of women activists around the world who were demanding that women's economic activities should be recognised and rewarded, not ignored and undercut, as most international assistance programs were doing in the 1960s. The book drew attention to women's contribution to productive work, and critiqued the gender-biased allocation of resources that resulted from the underestimation of women's role as producers.

In addition, Boserup's detailed review of the negative impact of colonialism on women contradicted the presumption that economic development improves women's status. It fuelled postcolonial scholarship, which argues that Western views of women of the South treat them as the 'other,' objectifying and trivializing them.

Boserup's holistic approach enhanced her reputation but also resulted in neglect. Disciplinary specialisation and expert opinions tend toward narrow views of the world and of economic development. In each of the areas of agriculture, economic history, population, and women's studies, her writings are more often quoted than read because they raise such a panoply of issues. But her work provides insight into current trends, and her penetrating analyses often anticipated contemporary debates. For example, her stance that food subsidies had a negative impact on agriculture has been a recurrent theme and her observations that improvements in women's health and education were perhaps the best ways of achieving family planning were noted at the UN Population Conference in Bucharest in 1974 and anticipated resolutions made at the UN Population Conference in Cairo in 1994.

Ultimately, Ester Boserup has contributed immensely to the understanding of economic development in the South: she helps explain why some areas are reluctant to adopt new agricultural technology, why men resist the loss of their patriarchal control over women, and how the world can adapt to a population over six billion. Her ideas continue to stimulate new scholars and activists.

Irene Tinker

Further Reading

Boserup, E. (1965), *The Conditions of Agricultural Growth: The economics of agrarian change under population pressure*, London: George Allen and Unwin.

Boserup, E. (1970), *Woman's Role in Economic Development*, London: George Allen and Unwin.

Boserup, E. (1981), *Population and Technological Change: A study of long-term trends*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Boserup, E. (1990), *Economic and Demographic Relationships in Development: Essays selected and introduced by T. Paul Schultz*, Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins Press.

Boserup, E. (1999), *My Professional Life and Publications 1929-1998*, Copenhagen: Museum Tuscularnum Press.