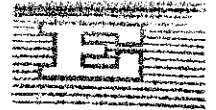


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THE EFFECTS OF URBANIZATION ON
FAMILY LIFE IN AFRICA

Prepared by the United Nations Secretariat

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Introduction

The movement from village to city produces a radical change in the family. Faced with new physical surroundings, with new jobs, strange new laws, and a highly increased tempo of life, the family members are forced to develop new roles and even a new set of habits. Family members go to work on different jobs, and the family no longer lives as a single working unit. In many instances in African cities newly arrived families intend to return to the village at the beginning of the next planting season. Their tenure in the city is not sure, and their life is split between two worlds. In cases where the wage earner goes to the city and leaves his family in the village, the family is put under the strain of separation.

The immigrants to the cities may be divided into three broad groups: Unmarried individuals, breadwinners who have left their families in the villages, and the conjugal family consisting of husband, wife, and children. This paper is concerned primarily with the third type of family as it struggles to make an effective adjustment in the urban world. Its struggles are made more difficult by the fact that close friends and relatives have been left behind. The family is reduced to the small conjugal, or "nuclear" unit and must learn to survive largely through its own efforts.

A. Instability and Maladjustment

One of the disorganizing effects of urbanization is seen in high divorce rates and broken marriages. A study of Senegal in 1958 shows 121 wives to every 100 married men, and that for every 100 married men 175 marriages were contracted during their lifetime. Among every 100 married men there had been 50 divorces. Among the

women a typical group of 100 averaged 147 marriages. In this the survey showed that over 30 per cent of the men had divorced at least once, 8 per cent twice, and 5 per cent three times.

A study of the Copper Belt shows that only 38 per cent of the married men and 45 per cent of the married women have married only once. The fact that 36 per cent of the men and women in the Copper Belt town had resided there less than five years gives one an idea as to the size of the "newcomer" problem. A study of Jinja, Uganda, where there are recently developed cotton mills, shows that 77 per cent of the men have lived in the town less than four years. Such instability of life obviously places a strain upon families and calls for community assistance to replace the former village-family type of support.

Differences in the social structure from one region to another must be considered in understanding the problem of family stability. In Senegal there is great ethnic variety, with the cities and towns serving as centers of cultural unification. The stability of many families is affected by this broader cultural process. In Central and East Africa there is a continued ebb and flow between town and country, which is related to the process of employment. Many workers first came to the cities under administrative pressure, or to pay taxes, or simply following the example of others. In any case they come to the cities with no thought of establishing there a permanent family home.

In the Republic of Congo an increase in marriage instability was found to be due partly to "contract marriages" -- those which lasted only during the period of a wage earner's employment contract. Christian marriages celebrated in accordance with customary law proved more successful than other marriages. The decree abolishing

polygamy, intended to protect marriage, had the opposite effect by disrupting old-family traditions.

In certain countries in West Africa one of the main reasons of instability of marriage in urban communities was found to be the conflict between the Christian ideal of monogamy and the traditional family system. The modern idea of marriage involving only two individuals is in direct conflict with the traditional concept, whereby the obligations of the husband and wife towards their respective families are paramount.

In the traditional environment the families of husband and wife are concerned to ensure the success of the marriage, for its breakdown results in the wife's family having to return the bride price which has already been distributed among various members of the family. In the towns there is no "pressure to preserve the marriage"; and the survival of the union depends solely on the couple, who are generally ill-prepared for married life in the modern sense.

Conjugal instability is aggravated by the presence of emancipated and unattached young women in the large towns. These women make attractive companions who grant their favors without demanding permanent obligations of the men. Women often find it difficult to adapt to urban life; and with the loss of their traditional place in the family, they become less docile as they become economically independent of their husbands.

In certain countries in Central and East Africa marriage instability is attributed to the fact that marriage in an urban environment does not conform to any recognized or widely approved pattern in regard to permanency of unions. There is a lack of mutual trust between spouses, as illustrated by the use of love potions, which it appears almost all women use.

B. Changes in Family Structure

There is a larger percentage of males than females in the cities. This, coupled with the continued practice of polygamy, makes it difficult for men, especially the young men, to find mates in the urban communities. Thus men marry much later in life than women. Figures for Dakar for males over 14 years of age show that 40 per cent of the permanent residents and 62 per cent of the temporary workers were bachelors. The corresponding rates for women were less than half that for the men. At Lagos it was found that there were almost twice as many single men as single women.

In Dakar, out of the whole population studied, 41 per cent of the households had small nuclear families, 32 per cent included one additional person and 27 per cent two additional persons. As regards female fertility, women over the age of 20 had an average of 4.99 children. The number of living children per woman is slightly higher for Christian families than for Moslems.

More marked variations are related to the social and occupational status of the husband. For example families of foremen average 3.2 children, farmers and fishermen 2.4, senior non-manual workers and officials 2.7, and the liberal professions 2.3, unskilled and domestic workers 2.1, and traders 2.06. Junior non-manual workers and officials show the lowest average of 1.1. The average number of children per male is 2.4 for monogamous husbands and 3.4 for polygamous husbands.

In Freetown, most of the tribal elements live in nuclear families, the average size of families being 3.9. Out of 269 households studied only 6 included more than one nuclear family. The average number of adults was 1.4 men, 1.3 women, 0.5 male children and 0.7 female children. 42 per cent of the Creole households had female

family heads, while only 14 per cent of the tribal households had female heads.

In East Africa the towns have abnormally few children. In Kampala the percentage of children under one year of age was 1.5 in the most thickly populated African quarter. In one suburb of Kampala more than half of the households included only one or two persons. But in the Copper Belt of Northern Rhodesia the fertility rate per adult woman in urban areas is higher than the rural fertility rate. At Livingstone out of 386 families surveyed, 139 had no children and 87 had only one. In the same area 20 per cent of the children under 15 lived apart from their mothers, usually in the country. In the Copper Belt, 16 per cent of the children under 15 lived apart from their mothers.

Studies in Senegal indicate that polygamy has not decreased as a result of urban life. It is affected, however, by religion, ethnic ties, and occupational differences. At Dakar farmers and fishermen (30%) and tradesmen (40%) show a higher than average proportion of polygamous marriage. Comparing unskilled workers, foremen, and manual workers, there is an increase in polygamous marriages in proportion to stability of employment and income level. Among non-manual workers polygamy occurs more frequently among those with seniority. The lowest percentage of polygamy (11%) appears among the liberal professions. Where monogamy exists from choice, it is accredited to the acceptance of western values and the western way of life.

In Freetown polygamy is not as frequent among Christians as among Moslems; however, it still exists, especially in the smaller towns of Sierra Leone. Polygamy persists in the towns of the Congo in spite of legislation against it. In Central and East Africa polygamy in the traditional form does not exist, but men may have one wife in the city and another in the country.

In a money economy the practice of "bride price" presents problems. The bride price has often proved to be prohibitive and constitutes for young men an insuperable obstacle to marriage to the woman of their choice. Since in the towns it is paid by the young man himself and not his family the bride price no longer represents the same relations between relatives as formerly.

In addition the marriage ceremony itself is a costly affair which often entails debts. The attitude of young people towards such practices is ambiguous, for while a young man grumbles at the debts incurred, the show nonetheless enhances his and his wife's prestige.

In Central Africa urban marriages are marked by the disappearance of one of the most essential features of rural traditional marriages -- that of the services the young husband used to give to his father-in-law. These are replaced by a cash payment. In Northern Rhodesia, for example, marriage initiation rites rarely survive migration to an urban area.

In Senegalese towns there is a general tendency towards individual choice of mates. Among certain tribes the consent of the parents is still essential for the choice of a first wife, a consent which does not necessarily run contrary to the individual choice. Ethnic endogamy is no longer a principle but remains a respected tradition among people who have recently moved to towns, and may account for an abnormally high number of bachelors in the population.

Another new element in the choice of a wife is that of the education of women and their adoption of western ways. This factor is mostly apparent among members of the liberal professions, non-manual workers, and officials. However, there is still an obvious hesitation to choose between the traditional and modern type of family.

Sometimes the religious problem arises, since many of the educated girls are Christian.

In Sierra Leone, there is an increasing trend toward exogamous marriages with members of the neighbouring tribes. Another factor in the choice of a wife is the desire of the "educated" husband for a wife who can share his tasks and keep up with his social position. Such women rarely exist in some regions.

In the Congo the men, who are dominating and traditional in their attitude toward women, seek a wife who is ready to accept the customary restrictions. Thus it is still customary for workers settled in urban areas to seek wives from rural areas.

In East and Central Africa two possibilities are open: one is for town-dwelling men or women to return to their area of origin for marriage. In the second, marriage in the town, gifts become tokens and cash payments very small. In tribes where marriage entails the handing over of a large number of cattle to the woman's family there is the strongest resistance to urban influence and pressure is strong in favor of contracting the marriage in the country of origin. In such marriages men are not eager to transplant their wives to the towns; but, when that is done, the marriage seems to be more strongly established than others. When marriages are contracted in the towns, they rarely comply with the traditional forms because of the absence of the family groups concerned. Such unions are more or less unstable. Inter-ethnic marriages are frequent in the towns. At Livingstone, Northern Rhodesia, 43 per cent of the unions were inter-ethnic and 24 per cent endogamous; while in the Copper Belt the proportions were 59 per cent and 28 per cent respectively.

C. The New Role for Women

Surveys conducted in Senegalese towns revealed the increasing number of "nuclear" families composed of husband, wife, and children only. This family unfortunately is not accompanied by a new type of family solidarity, for the traditional cleavage between the man's and the woman's world persists, making for instability in the "nuclear" unit. In such units the newly urbanized life has lost the companionship of other women characteristic of the extended family, without finding an emotional replacement in her husband's devotion. As a consequence, some wives tend to become lazy and apathetic, or to seek distractions from their loneliness and poor living conditions.

The urban wife finds herself trying to establish a foundation upon the shifting sands of rapid social change. Whereas the village elders used to bring up the children and look after their economic and spiritual welfare, this task suddenly falls to the mother who is unprepared for it. How can she prepare children for a world she herself does not understand? Perhaps an answer to this problem may be found in community services, including counselling and adult education. In the Congo many of the "évolués", realizing their own inadequacy to resolve the problem of child training under new, modern conditions, rely on schools or youth movements for that purpose. However these institutions reach only a small percentage of urban youth.

The emergence of the "nuclear" family is partly due to the fact that polygamy is becoming uneconomic in urban areas. It is only among senior employees and officials, and among teachers and members of other liberal professions that there is a definite trend among young couples to choose monogamy. Women living in towns acquire a

westernized emotional outlook to which men do not object.

In West Africa a survey indicated that the companionship ideal between spouses is beginning to gain ground as a result of urbanization. The self-sufficiency of the couple, conditions in the new residential area, the isolation of the individual in a heterogeneous urban population - all make for a closer conjugal relationship.

In Central and East Africa on the other hand the surplus of males often has a disrupting effect on conjugal relationships. In some regions of the Copper Belt "pot marriages" have developed because of the domestic needs of the workers. At Jinja, Uganda, there are various arrangements for "temporary wives" who are provided for as long as the relationship lasts, and the man enjoys the services of a house-keeper and sexual partner.

The high rate of illegitimacy in urban areas, parental neglect of children, and the abandonment of children to fend for themselves at an early age are factors contributing to the spread of delinquency and vagrancy in many cities. In Dakar the accelerated urban growth has created an upheaval in the moral standards of the family, and juvenile delinquency represents a disturbing development requiring the attention of the authorities.

In Lagos, Nigeria, economic and social problems have given rise to a class of irresponsible young men known as "Boma Boys" capable of any crime ranging from open burglary to trafficking in women. Boys who have either not completed their education, or who have done so but found no suitable employment, are sometimes organized by master thieves and "school" in delinquent techniques.

A survey made at Leopoldville showed that the wife's economic functions are

being limited in those families where the "évolués", who earn high wages and seek increased prestige, refuse to allow their wives to do paid work. The fact that wages are paid wholly in cash in most industrial centers in the Congo is having deep repercussions on the economic roles of husband and wife.

In West Africa women are playing a new role largely as a result of urbanization. Educated women are in demand as teachers, nurses, and saleswomen. In large towns even women who have little education find employment; half the female population of Lagos is gainfully employed. In the mining towns of Lunsar, Sierra Leone, husbands establish their wives in small business which sometimes require the women to travel. Economic self-sufficiency has helped in the "emancipation" of women so that they do not consider marriage as absolutely necessary to their existence, and a girl wishing to evade a marriage imposed by her father may take refuge in the town.

Women are increasingly participating in community associations. These range from small friendly clubs to élite clubs which sometimes are used as pressure groups. In Central and East Africa the towns have produced a new type of woman accustomed to economic independence, to changes in male partners, and to work which is quite different from that done by women in the country. As women stay longer in the towns, they move socially farther and farther from their sisters in the country. Once thus emancipated, it becomes very difficult for women to re-adapt themselves to the passive roles of legal subordinates which they must play in most rural societies.

D. Community Services for the Urban Family

In Senegal the "nuclear" family has not completely done away with relationships with the "extended" family. Links with relatives are maintained through visits, joint

celebrations, and mutual assistance. Family solidarity continues through mutual assistance to educate and to establish young people. The duty to come to the assistance of any relative who arrives in the town is strongly respected. This assistance, sometimes called "family parasitism", although resented and criticized by the more westernized Africans, is nonetheless widely practiced. In the Congo "family parasitism" among the "évolués" at Leopoldville accounts sometimes for 16 per cent of a family's food budget. Such gifts and hospitality maintain the urban couple's solidarity with the extended family group and provide a social investment which is to some extent reciprocal.

In many African cities "tribal unions" or "tribal associations" have replaced the older village tribal system. These originated when tribal chiefs sent some high-ranking elders to supervise their kinfolk and maintain tribal solidarity in the city. Tribal unions act as societies of mutual assistance, especially for new arrivals in cities where public or private social security schemes are not yet developed, or trade unions established.

In Poto-Poto, Congo Republic, spontaneous associations are formed among more than sixty ethnic groups for mutual assistance in securing lodgings or better employment. In the towns of West Africa such associations facilitate adjustment to the new urban circumstances. In Nigeria and Ghana tribal associations hold regular meetings to provide members with scholarships for children, funeral benefits, etc.. In Leopoldville mutual aid associations are not necessarily based on tribal relationships. It is noteworthy that presidents or leaders of these associations are chosen for their personal leadership qualities as demonstrated in town life rather than for their ancient position in the native environment.

The Watuttsi Dancers of Kampala, Uganda, are an interesting example of a tribal welfare group. They organize social functions the proceeds of which are turned over to the Watuttsi welfare organization to assist Watuttsi projects including aid to their destitute in Kampala. In East Africa the Ba and Banyurwanda associations in certain cities take care of immigrant tribesmen who become destitute in the cities.

Other associations in the cities are of an occupational, religious, educational or political nature rather than a tribal one. European-type trade unions are also developing. They take the form of craft guilds, as in Nigeria, or the Butcher's Co-operative in Gambia, or the Mutual Assistance Association of Houseboys in Stanleyville, or the Fishermen's Associations in towns of the Ghana. There is a growing number of recreational or social clubs which also have educational purposes. In Sierra Leone ladies' clubs and women's institutes have recently taken a leading role in spreading the study of home economics, sewing, and cooking.

A survey of voluntary organizations in African cities indicates that the newcomer to the urban centers is not entirely isolated. He may miss the warmth and protection of his native village, but he is likely to find some organization in the city which at least will serve as a partial substitute. The task of community development in urban areas may be to strengthen these indigenous associations and to supplement them with formal organizations and programs of community-wide services.

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

The process of urbanization, at least in its initial stages, has a disorganizing effect upon the family. However, there is wide evidence of spontaneous groupings and other processes which are favorable to a satisfactory adjustment of family relationships within urban surroundings. Do such examples of wholesome family life exist in your community? What are the policies which could be adopted to speed up or facilitate the adjustment of the modern family?

1. It has been suggested that one of the reasons for the large scale immigration towards the towns and industrial centers is the backwardness and under-development of the rural areas. Is this true of the country you represent? Are the migrants to the cities mostly the ablest young men, thus further impoverishing the rural communities? What dislocations in the rural family and in the city family are related to this migration of rural young men to the cities?

2. Should a community development programme be aimed primarily at:

(a) the improvement of rural surroundings in order to prevent the "exodus" to city life, or

(b) the provision of adequate services and facilities in urban areas for the rapid and easy integration of the family in its new surroundings?

3. The family that has recently arrived in the city is torn between urban and rural ways of living. How can the family be helped to achieve greater stability in its new environment? Do these families need:

(a) Assistance in the form of material aid?

(b) Social Welfare Services particularly family, youth and child welfare services including family counseling and family

education ?

(c) Improved housing conditions ?

(d) More stable employment, including vocational training ?

(e) A program of adult education including citizenship training, education in home economics, health and nutrition ?

(f) Formulation of a national policy for urbanization and adoption

of a national program ?

4. Should the urban family be encouraged to maintain its "extended family" ties; or, on the contrary, should the "nuclear" self-sufficient family be accepted as the desirable urban family unit ? What form of neighborhood organization should replace the associations traditional in the rural villages ?

5. Should such practices as "bride price" be discouraged by law if necessary ?

6. Does economic and social independence of women encourage promiscuous relations and prostitution ?

7. How can women be helped to reconcile the conflict between their increased economic independence and education attained in the city, and the maintenance of the traditional pattern existing in some rural areas ?

8. Some writers claim that city life builds up antagonism between men and women. This antagonism is due, among other things, to the relative inequality in education between them. While the "uneducated" woman may lower her husband's social standing, the "half-educated" woman may be more independent and unstable. How can this problem be treated ?

9. How can the question of "family parasitism" be approached? Should the traditional attitude towards the extended family expressed in "parasitism" be encouraged as a stabilizing influence for newcomers, even though it may be at the expense of the responsibilities and duties of the husband and wife towards each other and their children?
10. Is the polygamous family pattern breaking down in urban areas? What problems of family stability arise, and how are government and voluntary organizations dealing with these problems?
11. When parents move to the city, would you favor keeping the children in the village with the elders until they can join their parents, or sending them to the towns at an early age in order to avoid separating the family?
12. Are there problems of child neglect in your community? What is the extent of illegitimacy? Is vagrancy among children common; in what way is this connected with working mothers? What are the social welfare services available for neglected children in your community?
13. It has been claimed that juvenile delinquency and the development of gangs of children and adolescents are a common feature of urban communities. Are the laws governing delinquency and the treatment of juvenile offenders in your country suited to the country's traditions and circumstances? Are there juvenile courts and probation social services? Is vagrancy treated sometimes as delinquency?
14. To what extent is professional, or auxiliary social welfare personnel available? What are the training facilities, national and international, in your country?

The above paper is based upon the following reports and documents which are recommended for further reading:

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