THE GROWING NEED FOR HOME ECONOMICS
IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

by Michael Chiappetta*

We are coming to find that even where development is thought to be a magnificent and worthy goal, there are plenty of stresses and tensions in the developing society. Very soon in the development process the leaders and the people of a developing country discover that the new conditions of modernization require new attitudes and values, new skills, and new socio-economic relationships among its people and between the country and its former friends and enemies. At first glance this does not seem to be a particularly stressful situation. However, new attitudes and values, new skills, and new socio-economic relationships always imply a modification, if not a rejection, of old attitudes and values, old skills and old socio-economic relationships.

My way of looking at home economics in the development process is to look at the peculiar and particular role home economics can play within the wide range of new needs facing a developing country and within the framework of resources available to the developing country to meet its new requirements. Perhaps the best way to look at home economics in developing countries is to look at home economics in a developing country and, more specifically, in an internationally sponsored project in home economics. For example, let us consider a project which is presently being executed by a large international organization:

International Agency ABC

Country X

Home Economics Project

1. The aim of this project is to assist in raising the living standards of the population through a program of home economics education dealing with the family as a socio-economic unit. Stress would be laid on nutrition, child care, homecraft, hygiene, the management of family resources, and family relations.

2. The government considers the teaching of home economics to be of paramount importance as girls coming out of school will have a significant role to play in the national effort to raise standards of living. It is anticipated that the National Union of Women of Country X will, as one of its functions, assist in the teaching of home economics to other less fortunate women.

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3. Teachers' colleges have an enrollment of 2,350 students in 1965; some 800 of the students are girls. The secondary schools have an enrollment of 22,300 of whom about 5,400 are girls.

My experience in development tells me that on a country-to-country basis and in the international field, this project is rather typical of the language and thought which goes into both the development process and home economics. Here I would like to take the opportunity to note some key words which are related to home economics and which illuminate the particular role which home economics is asked to play in many developing countries.

I call your attention to the following phrases:

1. **The family as a socio-economic unit**
2. Family relations
3. Girls coming out of school will have a significant role to play in the national effort to raise standards of living
4. The National Union of Women will assist in the teaching of home economics to other less fortunate women
5. Teachers colleges with 2,350 in 1965, 800 of whom are girls
6. Secondary schools with 22,300 students, of about 5,400 are girls

My new, biased reading of some parts of the description of the project now explicitly reveals that international agencies and governments conducting development programs see home economics as an activity specifically designed for girls and women. In my mythical country X it is apparent that the intent is to improve and expand the teaching of the specific content of home economics to an increased number of girls for a longer period in order to produce a higher level of skills and to broadcast them to the women of country X for better discharge of "womanly" roles.

The point I am trying to make here is that country X has made a perhaps fatal error (certainly a costly one) in assuming that home economics is particularly and peculiarly related to women's role and that, obversely, the role of women in the development of country X should be concerned predominantly with home economics. As you can see, I am moving towards the thesis that development exacts so many requirements from the developing country that the only hope of success is that the country will use its meager resources, both capital and human, in an optimum fashion in order to hasten and complete the process. This calls for a close examination of the roles and choices open to the population, to a careful inventory of skills and behavior required by society and the most effective distribution of the skills to the most critical problems. Another way of saying what I am thinking here is that in the development process we can no more enjoy the luxury of thinking that home economics is for girls only than the luxury of believing that law or engineering or medicine are for men only.
Let me read to you from some yet unpublished, and perhaps unpublishable, thinking that is being done in an international organization:

1. Current changes affecting the social, economic, and political aspects of life throughout the world involve women even more than men, in new situations and thus they cannot escape the challenge of adjusting to them. Women appreciate the security given them by familiar patterns of life that they know and understand. They tend, therefore, to be conservative and this often makes them opponents of changes the implications of which they cannot fully comprehend. On the other hand, women who had had access to education and through this to an understanding of new opportunities and responsibilities both for themselves as individuals and as members of society, appreciate to what extent their contribution is limited by social law and custom. They, therefore, want education in its many forms to be extended to all members of their sex and to be able to participate more fully and at all levels of seniority, authority, and decision-making in fields of work and activity traditionally open mainly to men. They recognize that this change in the balance of relationships between men and women will call for readjustments in thinking and practice by both men and women and that this will involve not only more educational opportunities for women but a rethinking of the content and orientation of education for men and women alike.

2. Rapid industrialization and the paramount importance of economic development are factors common to all countries, varying only in degree and pace. A more effective use of woman-power and trained woman-power is an essential element in this development. Woman has always played a dual role in society but the first claim on her which she readily accepts has been her home and family, whether she has been married or single. The emergence of the economically independent spinster and the example she has given of what women can do when educated and trained, in contributing to the economic demands of society, have illustrated what can be expected from women as a whole. This presents problems of priorities as well as of double loyalties. The economic incentive to involve women more effectively in development calls for changes in the amount and the nature of vocational, technical, and professional education; for the provision of new social services; for the revision of the legal position of women; for revised labor codes; for replanned social security and for an acceptance by society that these are essential and right if women are to meet the new demands made upon them.

3. Rapid political development and the emergence of new nations have not only provided opportunities for women to participate effectively in public life but owe not a little to them. This incentive of woman action for the achievement of nationhood has proved, in many cases, stronger than the inhibitions against cooperation on equal terms with
women. Thus in some rapidly developing countries, women are taking their place side by side with men more fully than in countries with a different political history. The consolidation of this equality and partnership, as political independence is established, should be able to provide an example and an incentive for similar developments in countries where this is not yet achieved.

We believe that sound development for communities and countries as well as full and satisfying lives for individual men and women, can only come from their equal partnership in all the activities, responsibilities and benefits of modern society. To ensure this, the climate of opinion throughout the world in all communities, however small or remote, has to be such as to recognize this partnership in equality among men and women and to accept it as the goal of society and of individuals in it.

Education in its widest sense will be the basis of such a program. There is hardly a part of the world where plans for educational development do not take into account that half of the population that comprises women and girls. There is not as general an understanding and acceptance of the effects of this extension of education on the outlook and aspirations of women.¹

With this general concept of development in mind, let us return to my list of phrases and see how they color the role of a home economics effort in country X.

**The Family as a Socio-Economic Unit.** You can be quite sure that no one in country X is seriously studying the family as socio-economic even though development is going to revolutionize the economic role of groups of people now called families. The very size of the economic unit and the complete range of social relationships which are probably considered sacred in country X in a long tribal or even sophisticated history will have to be studied, maybe "agonizingly."

**Family Relations.** You can also be certain that there has not been a serious investigation of what alternatives there are to the present family relations which exist in country X. In country X, as in every country of the world, there is a built-in conservatism regarding the family structure. Usually this is buttressed and firmly supported by religious rites and doctrine which fight strongly against the establishment of new relationships between the parents, between children and their parents, and among the children. In many countries the patterns are protected not only by customs but by law. My mythical country X, which now is ready to invest in home economics education, is probably far from ready to change the basic pattern of human relations and the socio-economic pattern of families which comprise it.

¹Since this material is being prepared for publication and as such is still being negotiated, no attribution is made.
Girls Coming Out of School. Country X sees its girls leaving school with a significant role to play in raising the standards of living through concerns for nutrition, childcare, homecraft, hygiene, and the management of family resources. I think it's not an accident that this language does not say, "among other roles" or "as a part of the total contribution which women make to society." The most startling thing about this particular home economics project is that apparently boys will not be permitted to participate in it. Psychologists have a word which describes the reaction to discrimination against women in all other vocational choices. Is it "compensation"? Or "compensatory discrimination"?

National Union of Women. It is seen that the National Union of Women will assist less fortunate women to improve the teaching of home economics. I find it typical of developing countries, and perhaps of the developed countries too, to imply that women rarely teach men anything. Anyone who has ever watched a society realizes that this notion is "poppycock." It suffices to say here, however, that country X clearly and definitely assigns, if not relegates, the concern for home economics to its girls and women.

The statistics are perhaps the most outstanding element of this project. You will remember that, according to the home economics project description in country X, 2,530 students are in teachers' colleges in 1965. Of these 2,350 only 800 are girls. In the secondary schools there is an enrollment of 22,300, of whom only 5,400 are girls. For me, as a development technician, it is clear that the highest priority for country X is going to be, in education, putting into better balance the total educational system. I think this is not the place to go through a whole list of countries and point out to you that in most parts of the world girls and women are severely discriminated against in access to education and in access to vocational and professional life. It is appropriate to note here that, in the face of this discrimination, the assignment of home economics exclusively to girls merely reinforces the discrimination pattern.

It seems to me that country X needs to do two things at this point: First, it must open secondary schools to at least twice as many girls in a variety of vocational fields; and second, it must open home economics to boys. Let me take up the first point in this way. Let me read to you from a statement of development needs found in the United Nations system:

1. The rapid development of compulsory and, as soon as possible, free education to common levels for both boys and girls.

2. Planned programs of adult education and public information designed to create the climate of opinion necessary to accept women on terms of equality in all aspects of life and work and responsibility.

3. The revision of legislation and customary practice in so far as they affect the equality of men and women in private, public, and political life.
4. Special allocations of money and facilities for the education and training of women during the decade so that they can make up for their late start. This involves a greater percentage than usual of girls leaving school having access to further education and training. It also demands the provision for adult women either to take initial professional or vocational training or to have in-service training to refresh them for work to which they return after marriage responsibilities, or to carry their original training to a higher level or to prepare for new careers. Implicit in this are several factors. Training must be provided near the homes of the women and on a part-time basis if necessary or at residential centers with provision made for the care of children through the appropriate social services, and adequate allowances must be given to spare anxiety. The poverty of many developing countries, in the face of the varied and overwhelming demands made on them in all directions, makes the aspect of education a most suitable field for the cooperation of United Nations and its resources, bilateral country programs, and the foundations and corporations.

5. A lavish provision of scholarships for women in fields where their services are particularly needed and an access on favorable terms to educational facilities outside their countries where these are appropriate.

6. Full use should be made of women as specialists both by their own countries and by assistance agencies.

7. Encouragement for women to take up the teaching profession through the provision of training, through specialization in the teaching of subjects to the highest level, especially mathematics and science, through specialization in the teaching of young children but accompanied by a proper recognition of this specialization in conditions of service, salary, status and seniority, through a study of affective ways of using part-time service of married women teachers as a benefit to society and not as a concession to them.

8. Opening up education and training whereby women prepare for work hitherto mainly the preserve of men especially in engineering, industry, banking, commerce, insurance, and in management generally.

9. As influence depends to so great an extent upon seniority, salary and status, agencies and organizations particularly concerned with assisting women to take this equal part in society should set the example by appointing women with the suitable qualifications, personality, and experience to posts of responsibility where they are concerned with decision-making in general -- not just in aspects affecting women-- as a matter of deliberate policy.

10. Coeducation should be encouraged as a principle and developed wherever girls would not be held back by it.
11. Social education among boys and girls in day schools and boarding schools should prepare them for their role of mutual acceptance in the relationship of equality in home, work, public life, and leisure.

12. As change comes later and more leisurely in rural communities and as traditions die hard, there is a need to provide social or community education directed to women on their own so that they can experience and absorb the rejuvenating effects of literacy and the uses to which it can be put, and new skills and knowledge.

13. The need to relate professional, technical, and vocational education especially for girls to known and future occupational outlets and thus avoid the danger of educating for unemployment.

14. More effective use could be made of international resources for improving the status and opportunities of and for women if there was a planned, closely coordinated effort for this program between the various U.N. Specialized Agencies -- UNESCO, ILO, Bureau of Social Affairs, UNICEF, and the Status of Women Commission.

15. Above all, there is a need to create an informed public opinion upon the position of women in society and the ways of securing her full and educated participation together with an understanding that this is not a campaign designed to give one sex an advantage over another but to enable both to make their complementary and equal contribution to society.²

Fifteen points may seem excessive to explain why and how girls and women must achieve a functional equality with boys and men, but I am sure all of you are aware of the enormous pressures and prejudices which operate to maintain traditional patterns. The second point I am making may be stated more simply since the power to bring it into being rests with specialists who have good standing. In most countries home economists are specialists who operate in a restricted area. In a sense they have been driven into a compound and achieve their status and rewards within the "compound mores." In my example of the home economics project in country X, I think home economists should stress not only the country needs for improved nutrition, child care, homecraft, hygiene, management of family resources, and family relations but stress that these functions are not the exclusive property of girls and women. They might well stress that there can be little improvement if boys and men do not learn in these areas. Finally, home economists should lend their strength to the general insistence that young people should be trained in areas in which they have an interest, and have capacity and potential; in countries which have meager resources for training purposes, it would be imperative that boys and girls be carefully chosen to enter vocations which are critical for the development process.

If I try to pull all these thoughts together, I come out like this:

1. Development makes serious and disturbing demands on developing societies.

2. Development usually requires far-reaching changes in attitudes, values, and behavior.

3. In developing countries where there is usually a serious shortage of trained manpower, rigid priorities must be applied to select and train the most capable people for the most critical jobs. Few developing countries if any can afford the luxury of not considering women in this selection process.

4. All job specialities must compete against the development priorities of a country. Investment in home economics, therefore, must satisfy clear development needs. In addition, it must not only reinforce old stereotypes of vocational choices for men and women, but it might serve as a pressure to change cultural definitions of male/female roles and add to the pressures to free single women to enter all vocations with men.

The general conclusion I would present is that home economics has a unique role to play in development, a role which goes well beyond its direct contribution related to the well-known skills and knowledge it embraces. The special contribution of home economics will help to break down ancient and rigid discrimination patterns which deprive women of the opportunity to participate fully in their society. This special contribution can be made, however, only if home economists forego the luxury of their own restrictions and only if home economists lend their weight to the campaign to release women for other vocational choices.