Introduction

My Early Lessons in Household Economy

The fieldwork for this book started in 1983, and my last visit to Cairo was in February 1994. But my interest in the cultural contexts of household economy, particularly women’s roles in it, goes back to my childhood in Tehran, Iran, where I was born and raised. Despite my mother’s young age, her social class and access to information meant that, in the tradition of her hometown of Hamedan, she was the matriarch of a large network of women who frequently sought her help and advice on financial and domestic problems. I was eight years old when Aunt Ashraf, a relative whom I especially liked, came to visit my mother to discuss her decision to quit her job in a tobacco company in Tehran. My siblings and I were also in the room, although since we were children, we were ignored apart from the occasional call to fetch tea and water. So I overheard the conversation of the women as I usually did, but this time the subject of their discussion had such an impact on me that I can still recall it in minute detail.

Aunt Ashraf’s husband was a second cousin of my mother and at least eighteen years older than my aunt. In the rapid social and economic changes occurring in Iran in the 1950s, he had lost both his money and his social position. He spent most of his meager income on himself, leaving the family destitute and living in a single room where they shared washroom facilities with several other households. After her sec-
ond child was born, Aunt Ashraf tired of arguments over money and decided to look for a job. Through friends and family she managed to find one at a large tobacco company. I heard her say many times that if she had only had the chance to finish primary school, she would have found a much less demanding and better-paying job. Invariably, after complaining, she would thank God so as not to be ungrateful for all she did have—her health, her two beautiful daughters, and a husband who, though not ideal, was not as bad as many others. He never physically abused her and was kind to their daughters. Aunt Ashraf’s mother, widowed very young, helped with child care. However, a few months before this visit to my house, Aunt Ashraf’s mother had died, leaving her without any support.

Aunt Ashraf had decided to leave her job, which was a difficult decision since it meant a loss of income and the security of her old-age pension. She valued the pension greatly, as widowhood seemed inevitable and she did not have a son to rely on. She explained to my mother that with her daughters getting older, she could not leave them at home unsupervised, particularly since several of the neighbors had grown sons. Even if the situation was not actually threatening their virtue, it might damage their reputations and reduce their chances of finding good husbands. My mother, looking at me and my sister, commented, “When you have daughters you have to think of so many things. It would have been different if they were sons.” I was old enough to know that daughters have to uphold their own and their family’s honor and reputation, but the difference between me and my brothers was still not clear to me.

If Aunt Ashraf quit her job and stayed home, by shopping wisely and doing even more penny-pinching, she might be able to reduce her family’s expenses. Moreover, if she did not go to work she could do much more knitting, something she did in the evenings to supplement her income. A few months after her resignation, the company would give her all her pension money, which she thought would be 500 tumans (then $120). With this, she could buy a sewing machine and set up a small carpet-weaving frame. She could sew for friends and neighbors, and when she did not have any sewing or knitting, she could weave carpets, an art most girls of her traditional background learned as children. She also explained to my mother that this kind of work would enable her to hide her earnings from her husband and she might be able to persuade him to give her more money, particularly since, like all men, he was very concerned with his honor in the neighborhood and liked
the idea of her staying home to supervise their daughters. If things worked out well maybe she could even save some money for her daughters’ trousseaus and, perhaps within a few years, the girls would find suitors and marry. After a couple of hours of visiting and chatting, assessing her various options, she and my mother came to the conclusion that, given the situation, her plan was a good one. However, my mother advised her to wait a little before she submitted her resignation since there might be some aspects they had not considered. “You can always resign but you cannot get a job every day, particularly not one with an old-age pension,” my mother advised before Aunt Ashraf left our house.

In the end, she did resign, her plan worked well, and her daughters were married off. Then her husband got sick and was unable to work. For years, they had to rely on her meager income. Finally, when he died, she was frail and no longer able to work long hours. Though her daughters offered to have her move in with them, Aunt Ashraf refused as they were both housewives and did not have cash incomes of their own, and she feared it might cause friction between her daughters and their husbands. Traditionally sons are expected to look after their parents, especially their elderly mothers, but she had no sons. Friends and relatives continued to give her work, enabling her to survive, but she always regretted having given up the security of her old-age pension, which would have allowed her to live a dignified life in her old age.

In my early teenage years, under social pressure from a society obsessed with modernization, we moved from our old-style home in an old quarter to a modern suburban middle-class neighborhood of Tehran. Soon I discovered a sizable shantytown (zagheh-neshin) in the immediate vicinity of our new residence. There I became familiar with many families whose lives were ridden with the problems of poverty. I became preoccupied with the coping strategies they adopted to improve their lives. When I finally went to do research in Cairo, it was to

1. Many shantytowners were employed in our neighborhood and others nearby, so I became acquainted with some of the women who worked in our street. My window opened directly onto the shantytown, and I had ample chance to observe daily life there. I admired the resourceful and clever ways some of them used to improve their lives, although the adults of our middle-class neighborhood considered that these women were lazy and not so ambitious. Moreover, I was fascinated by the strong, well-organized resistance that women and children demonstrated when the government, pressured by our neighborhood association, tried to rehouse them in a different part of Tehran. The battle lasted three years, and finally they were rehoused. For more details and a comparative approach to my fieldwork in Iran and Cairo, see Hoodfar 1994.
investigate the ways in which the economic and cultural constraints of the wider society shape the coping and survival strategies of the poor, and how their choices may, in turn, affect the socioeconomic structure of the wider society.

Other aspects of my own experience also helped determine my research questions, particularly regarding the nonegalitarian nature of the household and family and the definitions of economic activity. My family was comfortably middle class, and we were proud of our cultural heritage and traditions. My mother was a homemaker of traditional upbringing who despite little formal education was very capable, realistic, and down to earth. My father, in contrast, was highly educated, a poet, a nationalist with a strong secularist streak, and a thoroughly “modern” man. Friends and relatives had much respect for him and considered him quite enlightened for his time. They often sought his advice on various matters, particularly about their children’s education. My parents gave us a happy and harmonious home, and my mother’s marriage was considered by herself and most of our relatives to be successful. Nonetheless, on many occasions I heard my father say that it was hard for him to single-handedly support a family of seven, that if families wanted to improve themselves and educate their children well, the women would have to work too.

My father usually went to work at 6:30 in the morning and came home around 2:00 in the afternoon. My mother would serve his lunch and tea, and he would take a nap. Then his friends would come to discuss politics, read poetry, and play backgammon. If they did not come, my mother felt obliged to have a game of backgammon with him. She got up an hour before he did, worked all day, rarely had a chance for a short rest in the afternoon, and went to sleep long after the rest of us. But rarely did my father or others credit her for her long hours of work running our household; only my father’s income, which my mother managed, was considered an essential contribution. Traditionally, as the eldest daughter I was designated to help my mother, and soon I learned the real value of her contribution to our domestic economy. By the time I was sixteen, believing nobody should take my hard work for granted, I had decided I would not be a housewife, a decision my mother (and father) wholeheartedly supported.\(^2\) This decision, however, did not ex-
empt me from helping my mother around the house, and this training made me very aware of the role of nonmonetary as well as cash contributions to the well-being of the family.\footnote{This made me very critical of the formal definition of economic activity and the calculation of gross national product when I was training in economics and business studies in the early 1970s in the United Kingdom and later in Iran. Appropriately, this definition has finally been broadened to include at least some of the subsistence activities of the informal economy. Eventually, after many ups and downs, I trained in development studies and social anthropology—disciplines that recognize alternative ways and approaches, albeit in a limited manner.}

As a young and somewhat politicized teenager, I was convinced that women were mostly to blame for their lot. I believed all it took to change the world was conviction and determination, and I often repeated an old Iranian proverb that says if people refuse to be oppressed, there can exist no oppressors.\footnote{Now I view this saying, which at the time appeared to me to be a call to resistance, as an unwarranted statement that blames victims for their sufferings.} My mother’s attempts to make me understand the structural and cultural constraints of our life failed miserably. It was not until some years after my short-lived and disastrous first marriage at the age of twenty-three that I finally understood what my mother had been trying to teach me.\footnote{I had married in England, at the recommendation of my father who gained some comfort from the idea that I was no longer quite alone. I had broken all the family rules by traveling by myself to England, where I had no friends and initially did not know the language. It was the first time a young woman in my kin group had traveled on her own.} Under great disapproval from my father and kin, I filed for divorce and only then learned that the law treated me differently from my husband. Though we were supposed to be equal, society expected me to be forgiving and readily offer sacrifices of all kinds to save my marriage. My husband, however, was to be constantly forgiven for his mistakes and treated like a king, especially since he was highly educated and held a respected social position.

Thus the constraints of society and law brought me to understand my mother’s lesson and to appreciate how difficult it is to challenge the world from a powerless and subjugated position. I understood why so many women try to manipulate their circumstances from within a culture and a legal system, and why breaking all the cultural norms can be very painful and not necessarily advantageous. Running and waiting,
month after month, in the corridors of the family court in prerevolutionary Iran—when women supposedly enjoyed many more rights than currently—talking and exchanging stories with other women and men, I also learned that men as well as women can be victims and losers. I realized that the key to social change lies beyond legislation. And so, when I began my fieldwork I carried with me, besides my economic and anthropological training, the life experiences of a Middle Eastern woman put to many tests. This I believe has helped me relate to my research community and understand their ambitions and life choices.

Theoretical Framework

Massive peasant migration to urban centers and suburbs of the developing world and the resultant growth of shantytowns, informal housing areas, and even the use of tombs as shelters for the living (Watson 1992) have attracted political and scholarly attention (Moser 1981; Lobo 1982; ILO 1989; Gilbert 1992; Angotti 1993). Interest in the lives of the poor and the causes of poverty during times of rapid social change is not new (Lewis 1959; Mayhew 1965; Perlman 1976; Lloyd 1979). However, attention to gender-specific forms of poverty and the differential impact of development processes on women and men is a recent dimension (Buvinic, Lycette, and McGreevey 1983; Youssef and Hetler 1983; Sharma 1986; World Bank 1991; Beneria and Feldman 1992; Mencher and Okongwu 1993; Thorbek 1994). As a graduate student preparing to do field research on coping strategies of the poor and the changing role of women in household economies (which was how I phrased my research topic at the time), I plowed my way through a considerable body of literature.

One of the early theories that attempted to explain the increasingly visible inequalities in the distribution of wealth was the culture of poverty approach, which maintained that a set of cultural traits and practices among the poor was perpetuated across generations through socialization, making it impossible to break from the “cycle of poverty” (Lewis 1959, 1961, 1966). In effect, since the perpetuation of poverty

6. I use the term “developing” as a convenient label because it is essential to differentiate between the historical experience of this group of countries and that of “advanced” industrialized countries. However, I am conscious of its limitations and that of other terms such as “Third World,” “less-developed,” or “underdeveloped.”
was attributed to behavioral patterns rather than to the structures of socioeconomic development, the poor were blamed for their own condition. Since then, more sophisticated studies on marginality and the informal sector have explicitly recognized the active and resourceful role played by the poor in earning livelihoods despite lack of access to well-paying jobs or social services (Perlman 1976; Moser 1981; Lobo 1982; Schmink 1984; Beneria and Feldman 1992; Gonzalez de la Rocha 1994). These studies demonstrated that the so-called marginal population was marginal only in terms of benefiting from the formal economic sector, whose structural constraints curbed their participation.

Detailed empirical studies on marginality and the informal economy gave rise to the concept of survival strategies, which specifically recognized the poor’s active role in combating their situation by making conscious decisions and choices between various options (Chant 1991; Gonzalez de la Rocha 1994). Studies of survival strategies, including migration, have drawn attention to the elaborate means households have developed to assess how best to match their resources (available labor, capital, information, social networks, skills) to opportunities in the labor market (Wood 1981; Chant 1991; Gonzalez de la Rocha 1994; Safa 1995; Hoodfar 1996a). Where conditions are not to their advantage, the poor may divert their resources into other subsistence activities (Redclift and Mingione 1983; Cigno 1991; Singerman 1995; Hoodfar 1996b). These findings, along with detailed documentation concerning women and development, resulted in dissatisfaction with the formal definition of what constitutes economic activity.

Studies further demonstrated that a household’s control over domestic resources and the choice of one alternative over others are shaped, if not directed, by the external socioeconomic environment. In other words, an understanding of the behavior of the domestic unit requires an examination of domestic factors, such as age structure, gender composition, and availability of material and nonmaterial resources, along with external factors, such as labor market conditions, distribution of wealth, and the socially accepted minimum standard of living. These studies have paved the way for a long overdue micro/macro approach to economic issues. In this study, I am particularly interested in the way macro social and economic policy is reflected in the domestic unit and how, in turn, the choices made at the household level influence and re-shape the socioeconomic structure of the wider society.

7. The concept was first used by Duque and Pastrana (1973) in a study of poor families in a peripheral area of Santiago (quoted in Schmink 1984: 88).
HOUSEHOLD

Detailed studies of survival strategies, informal economies, and migration patterns have drawn attention to the fact that most people, particularly in the developing world, go through life interacting with the greater society as members of a household rather than as autonomous individuals (Netting, Wilk, and Arnould 1984; Sharma 1986; Chant 1991; Cigno 1991; Booth 1993; Gonzalez de la Rocha 1994). This is especially true in Egypt, where individuals rarely live in a single-person household and where the interdependence of family and household members is emphasized (Rugh 1984; Shorter and Zurayk 1988; Weyland 1993; Singerman 1995). An individual’s choices and decisions are therefore affected by the roles the wider society ascribes to her or him as a member of a household—an institution that has proven resilient in the face of social change and economic development (Wilk 1984; Booth 1993; Anderson, Bechhofer, and Gershuny 1994; Singerman and Hoodfar 1996). It has also been argued that the domestic unit acts as a buffer to protect the individual from the shock of state policies and rapid social changes (Sayigh 1981; Booth 1993; Singerman and Hoodfar 1996). In an uncertain world where the labor market is susceptible to sudden changes and the state machinery is continuously threatened by instability, membership in household or kin-based groups is a person’s chief means of access to resources and security (Lomnitz 1977; Wellman and Wortley 1989; Cole 1991; Aramaki 1994; Gonzalez de la Rocha 1994; Singerman 1995). In other words, their lack of resources and security ties the members of a household together. For these reasons, we need to look at individual economic behavior in the context of the household.

The study of women and development during the last two decades has improved our understanding of survival strategies (Moser and Young 1981; Buvinic, Lycette, and McGreevey 1983; Beneria and Roldan 1987; Tinker 1990; Beneria and Feldman 1992; Mencher and Okongwu 1993; Thomas 1994; Thomas-Emeagwali 1995). This literature underscores the role of household structure and family relations—including the sexual division of labor—in determining how different members of a household participate in economic activity or benefit from it. These debates have broadened the focus of research on economic behavior to include the household and gender ideology as well as the labor market. The need to adopt the household/domestic group as a unit of analysis is particularly significant if the focus of attention is women’s economic behavior as, almost universally, women tend to invest more time in activities that have remained outside the cash economy. Through these
activities women make important economic contributions to the domestic unit (and the national economy). Consequently, in assessing the viability of entering the labor market, women weigh the importance of these so-called extra economic contributions to the household against the utility that their wages can bring. Because of women's roles and responsibilities within the household, the supply of female labor cannot be explained solely in terms of individual strategies for economic participation (Beneria and Roldan 1987; Chant 1991; Cole 1991; Booth 1993; Gonzalez de la Rocha 1994; Hoodfar 1996b).

The household, like other social institutions, is not transhistorical but is subject to modifications in its internal structure, organization, and economic role, as a result of external pressures such as economic change. Therefore, it must be treated as part of the complex of institutional structures of a given society (Wallerstein 1984: 17; Chant 1991; Cole 1991; Booth 1993; Singerman and Hoodfar 1996). Furthermore, the household unit is always in flux and should therefore be studied diachronically to capture the dynamics of its evolutionary nature.\(^8\) The effects of the cycle of family life—expansion, consolidation, and dispersion—on the economic organization of the household have long been recognized by those researchers who have relied primarily on empirical studies rather than on their sociological imaginations.\(^9\) The return of the household as a unit of analysis is more a revival of a scholarly tradition than a groundbreaking perspective.

THE HOUSEHOLD AS A NONEGALITARIAN UNIT

Household-focused studies resulted in a wealth of detailed information about the ways in which households divert resources to domains that yield maximum return while accounting for risk factors.

8. Studies document that even fertility, a biological aspect of the household/family/domestic unit, is influenced to a considerable degree by external factors (Leibenstein 1981; Kagitzibasi 1982; Hoodfar 1994; Obermeyer 1994).

9. Chaianov (1966), writing about Russian peasant households in the nineteenth century, took the household as his unit of analysis and used a definition of the household that is still relevant: “The family interests us as an economic phenomenon, not a biological one. We, therefore, . . . must express its internal composition as a function of consumption and working units in the different phases of the family cycle. . . . Each family, then, depending on its age, constitutes in each of its different phases a completely distinct work apparatus, according to its labour force, the intensity of demand exerted by its needs, the consumer-worker ratio, and the possibility of application of the principles of complex cooperation” (pp. 34–36).
By the late 1970s, the scope of these studies had expanded to include not just cash but also other forms of utility produced in various ways. However, in many of these studies the household itself was assumed, often implicitly, to be an egalitarian unit or the domain of a “moral economy” where individuals selflessly contributed to the welfare of one another (Sahlins 1972: 189–196; Standing 1984, 1989, 1991; Deere 1990). Hence the premise “rational man” was replaced by that of “rational household.” Historical and cultural/structural diversities that exist in the way household responsibilities are divided according to age and gender hierarchies were not taken into account.

The emergence of a new feminist literature on women and development, gender ideology, and intrahousehold relations, based on a wide range of cross-cultural documentation, effectively questioned these assumptions of egalitarianism (Folbre 1986a, 1988; Beneria and Roldan 1987; Roldan 1988; Chant 1991; Gonzalez de la Rocha 1994). However, just as gross national product or income per capita measurements alone do not tell us about the distribution of wealth and the welfare of a nation, documentation of household practices and survival strategies that indicate a rise in the standard of living for the unit does not tell us how individual members are benefiting. Many studies show that often a slight improvement in the standard of living of a household may come at a considerable and uneven cost to individual members (Mies 1982; Beneria and Roldan 1987; Stolcke 1988; Sen 1990; Cole 1991; Jelin 1991; MacLeod 1991; Singerman and Hoodfar 1996). In many societies a woman’s contribution to her household often exceeds that of her male partner, but her share of benefits is less (Folbre 1984; Papanek 1990; Thomas 1991; Beneria and Feldman 1992). While neoclassical theory has convincingly argued that the division between women’s participation in nonmarket activities and men’s in market activities is based on efficiency and the maximization of utility, one partner contributing more and receiving less has not been justified.11

10. The concept “rational man” is a central premise of neoclassical economic theory. It refers to the idea that individuals make choices that yield the highest benefits.
11. The introduction of psychic utility or emotional rewards that neoclassical theorists often use as justification does not solve the problem, as introducing nonmaterial variables into the model forfeit the viability of empirical research of household and intrahousehold economic behavior. A method to measure psychic utility efficiently has not yet been developed (Becker 1981). Further, as Folbre (1984) points out, the argument that child care (which accounts for much of the discrepancy between the contributions of men and women) is its own reward is self-defeating, for if this were true why would men choose to deprive themselves of such pleasures? Incompatibility with their productive activities
Moreover, the expanding literature on domestic violence (Homer, Leonard, and Taylor 1985; Johnson 1985; Viano 1992; Baumgartner 1993; Toch 1993) invalidates the classic argument of altruism—used at times to rationalize unequal gender relations in domestic economy.\footnote{After all, altruism is supposed to take the form of a voluntary contribution. Within a model based on the premise of rational man, how can we argue that there is not necessarily a direct relationship between access to the household's resources and the actual and potential contribution? Why should a partner who is seeking to maximize her or his utility in wider society choose to remain in a unit where she or he is at a disadvantage? If the premise of the rational man is to hold true for women too, we must seek other explanations.} Inegalitarian relationships, then, are more likely explained in terms of the constraints imposed on individuals as a result of race, ethnicity, sex, or position in gender or age hierarchies (Folbre 1984, 1988; Beneria and Roldan 1987; Tinker 1990; MacLeod 1991; Beneria and Feldman 1992). Data from many societies suggest that women are less likely to have marketable skills, their wages in the labor market are less than those of men, they tend to be concentrated in the least secure occupations, their property rights may be limited, and their marriage and divorce rights may be at the discretion of others; and, regardless of the degree of their investment in the welfare of their children, women may lose parenting rights in the event of divorce or on leaving the household. In short, they lack effective power to promote their own interests within the household (Young, Wolkowitz, and McCullagh 1981; Beneria and Roldan 1987; Sen 1990; Thomas 1991; Gonzalez de la Rocha 1994). Therefore, the processes of development and social change should be understood in conjunction with preexisting economic, cultural, and ideological aspects that influence and, in turn, are influenced by such change. Factors affecting the individual’s position within his or her domestic unit and intrahousehold relations continuously evolve in response to social changes. However, while it is important to take into account the structural and cultural/ideological constraints, it must not be assumed that individuals are passive recipients of change and victims of cultural/economic forces that they have no part in generating. Men and women are social agents who actively resist, struggle, and reform their environment, including their own domestic relationships.
The household is an institution characterized by what Amartya Sen (1990) has termed "cooperative conflict." He points out that while members of a household face outside forces as a unit and harmonize their activities, this does not exclude them from having internal conflicts of interest regarding the distribution of the fruits of their activities. Moreover, a prevailing atmosphere of cohesion and integration in a household may go hand in hand with many legitimized inequalities. The strategic choices that yield the highest return for all members of the household may be unfavorable to a particular member who may not have the power to change her or his circumstances (see also Beneria and Roldan 1987; Dwyer and Bruce 1988; Beneria and Feldman 1992).13

**WHAT CONSTITUTES "ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTION"**

Theoretically, economic activities are all those activities that satisfy human needs through the production of goods and services, regardless of whether they are channeled through the cash market or other forms of exchange. Ideological prejudices and historical practices of national accounting systems have, however, during the last century, given priority to the market-oriented sector, hindering the incorporation of other forms of economic activity into national accounts (Goldschmidt-Clermont 1990; Folbre and Wagman 1993).14 In her survey of empirical research on both industrialized and developing countries, commissioned by the International Labour Office (ILO), Luisella Goldschmidt-Clermont (1982, 1987) demonstrates that unpaid household work and other subsistence activities in many countries form as

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13. The inclusion of structural gender and age role differences and conflicting interests of different members in the study of household survival strategies has introduced a new level of complexity. The major constraint arises from the difficulty of defining "perception of interest," particularly in cross-cultural studies or studies in which the results must be analyzed using terms and concepts evolved with reference to societies and cultures other than the one under study (Asad 1986). Perceptions of self-interest, legitimacy, and achievement are socially constructed and deeply influenced by prevailing norms and practices of the community (Sen 1990).

14. These prejudices are often subsumed under the rubric "problems of measurement" (Waring 1988; Beneria 1992). The situation has become exasperating. While under pressure to produce internationally compatible statistical information, many developing nations have little experience with modern national accounting and lack resources to develop their own systems. Thus they tend to adopt models from the developed world that are often themselves outdated. Consequently, national accounting procedures are persistently inadequate.
much as 40 percent of the estimated national economy.\textsuperscript{15} Therefore, national accounting figures are only a rough estimate of actual national economies.

Including more subsistence activities in the assessment of national economies is among the improvements recommended by the United Nations (UN) since 1968, but few governments have fully implemented these changes (Waring 1988; Beneria 1992).\textsuperscript{16} At least partly because governments are generally more concerned with activity they can monitor and tax, they have shown very little interest in devising accounting techniques for nonmonetary economic activities and transactions that would not easily lend themselves to the application of taxes. In any case, even the improved UN definition of what should be formally considered “economy” excludes a substantial share of own-account production, much of which is women’s work (Beneria 1981, 1992; Recchini de Lattes and Wainerman 1986; Waring 1988).\textsuperscript{17} The fact remains that whether or not these economic activities appear on the national balance, they represent real value to the people who produce and consume them.

This arbitrary definition of economic and productive activity works to women’s disadvantage. There is no good reason why cooking and food processing should be considered less productive than growing food, especially when cooking for one’s employer is an economic activity but cooking the same food for one’s own household is not (Waring 1988). Or, as Nancy Folbre (1986a) asks, why is caring for children considered less productive than caring for livestock? What women do is categorized as domestic and taken for granted, but what men do is work.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{15} Goldschmidt-Clermont compiled a report in 1982 based on a survey of seventy-five research studies on unpaid labor carried out in the “developed” world. These studies estimated that the value of unpaid work accounts for between 25 and 40 percent of measured national income. Her second report in 1987 of forty studies of unpaid work in the developing countries estimated that unpaid work forms about half the labor expended for meeting human needs and between 25 and 50 percent of total consumption.

\textsuperscript{16} India is an exception in its development and implementation, prior to the UN’s report, of a national accounting system incorporating many subsistence activities.

\textsuperscript{17} Goldschmidt-Clermont (1987: 8) in her ILO-commissioned study has categorized these items as goods and services (meals, washed clothes, care of children and of the ill), which are the product of domestic activities; processing for own consumption of primary commodities by those who do not produce them; own-account production of commodities consumed in households and not sold on the market; and the upkeep and repair of dwellings and other buildings.

\textsuperscript{18} An important debate that has implications for women is what constitutes “work” as opposed to leisure. In an attempt to solve the problem for empirical work, Gronau (1977:
According to the UN Convention "all persons of either sex who furnish the supply of labor for the production of economic goods and services" should have been included in labor force statistics during the last two decades (ILO 1976: 32, quoted in Beneria 1981: 21). Adoption of such a definition by national governments would give visibility to women and children in national figures. These debates are not motivated by a new form of statistical fetishism. These figures, used for social and economic planning, can be misleading and possibly lead to a faulty diagnosis of development problems. For instance, social planners who operate with a mythical image of actual labor force participation may overestimate the extent of availability of human resources. This can lead to the implementation of policies that stretch the long working hours of an already overworked population (Rogers 1980; Waring 1988). Without meaningful data, peasant poverty might be attributed to a lack of motivation for a better material life. However, studies of peasant responses to inflation or migration for higher wages document that what appeared to have been a lack of motivation was in fact the lack of a reasonable return after all the economic factors and the cost and benefits for all the members of a peasant household were considered. Similarly, as I discuss in chapter 4, women’s low response to the formal labor market is more often the result of a rational economic assessment of the opportunity-cost ratio than the consequence of purely cultural factors.

Statistically invisible groups of the economically active population are categorized as consumers as opposed to producers. They falsely appear to be a burden to their households and the national economy. These assumptions become embodied in the ideology of the nation, to the disadvantage of invisible groups, the largest of which is women (Waring 1988). Although many women contribute more hours of work to support their households than their husbands do, they are often heard to declare "I do not work" or "I am only a housewife," because

\[104\] has suggested that "work" is what one would rather have someone else do, while it is almost impossible to enjoy leisure through a surrogate. This distinction, however, is derived from the assumption that one would not enjoy work. While the increasingly alienating nature of work in modern industrialized societies may render some truth to this definition, for some groups or occupational categories work remains a source of pleasure and satisfaction. While I accept Gronau's definition of leisure, his definition of "work" is best rephrased as those activities that someone else can perform, yielding the same result. In other words, activities for which there can be a market substitute (Reid 1934).
their labor is not remunerated (chap. 4). These assumptions have significant implications for the status and position of women in their households and in society.

In much the same way as national income is measured, household income and standard-of-living measures are often based on the household’s monetary earnings. While the level of household living is a reflection of cash income, subsistence contributions such as housework, repairs, construction, and the utilization of public goods and services are omitted, leaving us with an incomplete picture. Furthermore, empirical studies have demonstrated that networking and access to information are crucial to assessing the labor market or maximizing other forms of economic activity (Lomnitz 1977; Lomnitz and Perez-Liazu 1987; Wellman and Wortley 1989; Aramaki 1994.). In light of all these factors, I have defined economic contribution simply as all those activities that bring direct or indirect material benefit to the household.

Objectives of the Study

As I continued to read about various aspects of the household economy, I was struck by the lack of empirical research and information about the Middle East, especially compared to the wealth of information from Latin America. What little existed focused primarily on gender ideology and the role of Islam in the lives of women and families, although more recently the focus has shifted to the return of veiling and fundamentalism. It was as though Muslims, and in particular Middle Eastern people, lived in the realm of ideology and religion while the rest of the world lived within the economic structure.19 Such a division is of course artificial and a creation of the limited vision and skills of social scientists, since in reality people of all cultures live their lives with influences of ideology and economy simultaneously as they try to satisfy their emotional and material needs (Barnett and Silverman 1979; de Certeau 1984; Bourdieu 1990). However, the portraits of Middle Easterners primarily in the realm of ideology stemmed from

19. Although there were few micro studies of the economic lives of communities, many studies looked at social policies, political movements, or the impact of oil revenues on the economy. See, for instance, Abdel-Fadil 1980; al-Alwany 1984; Richards and Waterbury 1990; Handoussa and Potter 1991; and Amin 1995.
more than a century of orientalist writings presenting them as driven by religion and the extreme male sexual appetite (Said 1978; Alloula 1986; Kabbani 1986; Mabro 1991; Lazreg 1994). This distortion that betrayed my personal experience and previous research in Iran convinced me that—despite the concern and apprehension expressed by some of my professors, who wanted me to take up a more "serious" topic—my research on household economy in the Middle East was vital.

So in January 1983 I went to Cairo to research the survival strategies of low-income households in newly urbanized neighborhoods.²⁰ Although the emotional and ideological aspects of everyday life are significant, I chose to focus on economic contributions and the distribution of material benefits within the household. This study accounts for patriarchal authority and Muslim mores and prescriptions only to the extent that they are manifested in family dynamics, decision making, and the legal and economic system that prevailed in Egypt. Similarly, I examined the structural forces of the society, such as the ideology of the state, industrialization, changing labor market conditions, and state policies toward public goods and services, in terms of their impact on the household as a whole and the changing position of individuals within the household. In the process I have brought together the somewhat disparate fields of political economy, development, gender studies, urban anthropology, and social change that reflected my interdisciplinary as well as cross-cultural education.

In trying to explain people’s choices about their household economies and their survival strategies, I relied on a holistic approach that would make it possible to examine social (cultural and ideological) factors and economic rationales for income acquisition and distribution within the household without neglecting the influence of individuals. Although social scientists have been slow in adopting a multilayered framework, I found that many people in my research communities explained it eloquently. In fact, my favorite term for this framework, the "backgammon approach," came from an older Iranian informant.

Everyone’s primary concern, he said, is to do as well as possible economically and socially. Hence, real-life decision making is a very delicate matter involving many factors, some of which are out of one’s control.

²⁰ The concept of strategy in sociological literature is discussed by Crow (1989). I have adopted Altorki’s (1986: 149) definition of strategy as a rational calculation of behavior that an individual adopts to promote his or her interests.
Backgammon, like life, can be won only with both luck and strategy.\textsuperscript{21} The role of the dice and the constellation of pieces already played on the board determine the player’s possible options. However, one must also be able to see what moves are possible in a given situation and have a good knowledge of the rules in order to manipulate them to one’s advantage while preventing competitors from breaking or bending them to one’s disadvantage. For instance, he explained, whether one is born rich or poor, male or female, in time of plenty and peace or war and revolution all affect one’s life, yet one has little influence over these matters. By choosing the best possible option, the player can make the most of good or bad luck.

The study of household survival strategies and economic behavior is basically the study of how households best match their own resources, such as capital and labor, with opportunities in the formal and informal labor market and with the production of utility in other economic domains while accounting for factors such as risk, security, and time span.\textsuperscript{22} Opportunities and constraints of the wider society (macro conditions), whether they are artifacts of markets, political situations, or cultural and gender ideologies, are as important to the study of survival strategies as the micro (the household and its internal dynamics) factors.

To look beyond an approach that treats household/family as a solely ideological unit, I have examined the economic as well as social forces that encourage individuals to remain within their household and unite and cooperate with other members despite the existence of conflicts of interest. This approach also makes it possible to examine whether socioeconomic change reproduces, exaggerates, or modifies existing inequalities within the household, particularly between husband and wife. Throughout this work, I have tried to incorporate a discussion of the aspects of Egyptian culture and economy that affect household economic strategies and resource accumulation and distribution, as well as the impact of economic and social change on gender relations.

\textsuperscript{21} Backgammon is played widely in the Middle East. Folk history has it that backgammon was developed in pre-Islamic Iran to counter chess, which had been introduced from India. Whereas backgammon combines skill and chance, chess relies solely on the player’s expertise and alertness.

\textsuperscript{22} I have used “production of utility” to accommodate not only income in cash and in kind but also the material benefits resulting from domestic and “do-it-yourself” activities (such as building and repairing one’s home) that usually lie beyond the sphere of cash-earning and subsistence activities.
In addition to this holistic approach, the study of survival strategies requires a meaningful working definition of a household’s income. The standard of living of an urban household is a reflection not only of its cash income but also of its full income and resources. The full income of a household consists of several elements: (1) the economic activities directed toward the production of material utility, whether they are cash-generating activities in the formal or informal sectors or non-market activities such as housework, food processing, house repair, or subsistence production; (2) the extent to which a household draws on public services such as free schooling, medicine, or subsidized goods; (3) rent and other transfers such as gift exchanges. These categories embody the outcome of other activities such as networking and information gathering. Hence, in this work, income refers to material benefits that household members draw from all activities, whether these benefits are cash or other.

As this book is above all an anthropological account of daily life in the neighborhoods, I have in the following chapters provided a summary of major concerns and dilemmas that I faced in the field as an outsider, though not a European. I discuss how my gender and religion posed a major obstacle in my contacts with the male informants and resulted in the imbalances in the quality of the data I collected from men and women.

As it is not possible to understand individual and household economic and social choices without knowing the context in which these choices are made, I outline the development of the social and economic policies that have shaped Egypt’s society, political structure, and labor market. Since the mid-1970s, Egypt’s growing international debt forced the government to implement structural adjustment policies and effectively dismantle the state’s role in providing social amenities, basic food subsidies, education, and health care. This change has had a major impact on how households allocate their resources.

The definition of who is considered a member of a household varies from culture to culture. In Egypt, households are almost universally based on blood and marriage kinship (Rugh 1984; Shorter 1989). Therefore, it is not surprising that the literature on the Middle East has often used the terms “family” and “household” interchangeably. Here, I use “family” rather than “household” only where the emphasis is on kinship rather than on a unit that is based on the pooling of resources. While blood kinship is a given—at least ideologically—marriage kinship is a domain where individuals have more room to choose whom they want
to be related to. Therefore, who one marries and under what conditions are important life and survival decisions, though the sterile definition of economic life has meant that these elements are often omitted from economic studies. Marriage is particularly important since the nuclear family is the predominant domestic unit in Egypt (Shorter and Zuraiq 1988) and specifically in my research communities. Moreover, as marriages are arranged by parents, especially in the case of daughters, emphasis is placed on how the future household/family will survive economically as well as socially. To this end, parents—particularly aware of the legal and cultural limitations on women—have adopted strategies to ensure marriages that from the outset secure their daughters’ positions vis-à-vis their husbands. The involvement of parents in arranging the marriage of a daughter, though curtailing the freedom of young women, puts them in stronger positions as they enter marriage as compared with many of their counterparts in urban Latin America who enter into compromiso (common-law) unions. These issues are the essence of chapter 2, where I discuss the prevailing ideology regarding sex roles and marriage, as well as the legal and customary responsibilities of each partner within marriage. The main focus, however, is on the ways in which women and their parents have manipulated traditional practices to circumvent some of the customary and legal limitations placed on women. Drawing on my data, I argue that the success of these newly evolved strategies reinforces the positive role of parents’ involvement in marriage arrangements for their daughters, even for those women who aspire to be associated with “modern” rather than “traditional” culture.

Traditional as well as modern ideologies designate men as household breadwinners, and thus men are under considerable pressure to maximize their cash income. In chapter 3 I outline different strategies that men employ to increase and diversify their cash income. Low-income earners are alert to market change and quick to respond to it. Working in several jobs and migrating to oil-producing countries are common strategies employed to raise cash. By decreasing the supply of labor, on the one hand, and by creating demand for goods and services, on the other, large-scale migration has improved the wage structure of the unskilled and semiskilled laborers considerably. Moreover, migration has been the single most important buffer against the shock of Egypt’s structural adjustment policies for those who occupy the bottom echelons of the labor hierarchy.

In chapter 4, where I look at women’s paid activities, I examine
how modern labor laws, the sexual division of labor, and gender ideology stimulate women’s responses to the labor market. I discuss how women’s opportunity-cost considerations encourage uneducated or unskilled women to participate in informal rather than formal cash-earning activities. Educated women chose to work in the public sector despite its low wages because this is the only formal sector workplace that has made allowances for women’s double burden as mothers and homemakers as well as employees. Women’s low rate of labor market participation is often viewed as an indicator of their conservatism and traditional tendencies. However, my data indicate that where the terms of labor market are favorable, traditionalism or religiosity did not prevent women from seeking employment.

Cross-cultural studies have indicated that the welfare of the household is affected by who manages the cash, the man or the woman (Dwyer and Bruce 1988). However, access to and control over monetary resources are important indications of one’s position in the household power structure. In chapter 5, I examine factors that influence household budgeting and money management, as well as the extent to which women’s cash-earning activities lead to the expansion or contraction of women’s access to household or husbands’ monetary resources. Male migration also has an impact on women’s access to husbands’ income, and both men and women adopt strategies that safeguard and promote their influence in controlling cash resources.

In chapter 6, I examine nonmonetary contributions, which account for a large portion of a poorer household’s total income. These include activities such as housework, childbearing, production of foodstuffs, and construction and repairs of the dwelling. Historically, the ability to make use of public goods and services, including subsidized goods, free medicine, and education, has had a significant impact on a Cairene household’s standard of living. While the present government has suffered a loss of credibility because of its failure to deliver these goods and services, Islamic oppositional groups have filled this role in some neighborhoods, generating much legitimacy for themselves. The time, skill, and effort expended in channeling these resources to the household are important contributions that are often overlooked. Moreover, as the data indicate, efforts to take advantage of these public goods have caused changes in the actual, if not always ideological, gender division of labor.

Households need to reproduce themselves, both biologically and socially, in terms of the community or social group to which they belong
or with whom they aspire to be associated. Consumption is an important aspect of this social reproduction. Material culture and consumption, such as the use of modern medicine, education, and food, are some of the ways households express membership in their changing communities and in the wider society. Poverty hinders people and households from participating in the consumption patterns of their community, so they have to devise strategies to improve their standard of living while simultaneously consolidating their membership in the rapidly changing society. In chapter 7, I examine the social and economic elements that influence consumption patterns and strategies in the research community and question the validity and usefulness of the arbitrary division between consumption and saving.

Chapter 8 is devoted to the significance of networking and informal associations for the welfare of low-income households. To minimize economic insecurity and discrimination against the poor by modern institutions such as banks, low-income earners have adapted old reciprocal relations to their “modernizing” realities. For instance, the revitalization and spread of the traditional practice of saving clubs (gāmīyāt) and with it the role of women who historically have organized them is one strategy to combat the inaccessibility of the banks. Similarly, other horizontal and vertical networks, particularly those of women, help the household to secure other forms of support. Relationships with relatives have been shaped to minimize obligations while enhancing the kind of support that is more effective among cash-poor households.

Chapter 9 addresses the role of sexuality and fertility in the lives of men and women and their households. Women value their fertility and sexuality not only in terms of fulfilling a basic and instinctual need but also as a variable in their survival and economic security throughout their life cycles as adult women. Social and economic factors also mitigate against the adoption of new attitudes to customs such as female circumcision and son preference, both by women and by the community.

Chapter 10 brings together the major factors discussed in the preceding chapters and provides an overview of survival strategies. In addition, this chapter outlines the prominent cultural, economic, and ideological factors that influence relations between households, particularly between husbands and wives.