

# 1 Introduction

The collection of data on women's status has not been a primary objective of the DHS. Nevertheless, a large part of the data that are routinely collected by these surveys can effectively be used to measure several important dimensions of women's status. Further, since DHS uses a standard questionnaire with minor modifications for data collection in every country, identical indicators can be developed for all countries, making comparisons of women's status across countries feasible.

In this report, women's status is examined using indicators of women's access to economic and social resources and opportunities. The indicators used are fashioned out of available DHS data for 25 countries surveyed since 1991. Comparisons by gender and age are made whenever possible. If female access to a resource is found to be limited in comparison to that of males in the same country, the conclusion will be one of gender bias in allocation of that resource. Where corresponding data on males are not available, the situation of women is described in absolute rather than relative terms using cross-culturally unambiguous indicators. An attempt is also made to examine more closely the situation of women who fall into the special categories of household heads, divorced or separated women and widows. While these categories of women are recognized as distinct, little is known about their access to economic and social resources in developing countries.

The household schedule of the DHS core questionnaire collects data on sex, age, education, household headship, relationship to the household head for all household members, household possessions, and household access to toilet facilities, water and electricity. The individual woman's questionnaire collects data for women between the ages of 15 and 49 years on their marital status, parity, media exposure, contraceptive use, education, employment, and some information on their husband's education and employment. Using combinations of these household and individual level data, the chapters that follow explore several different aspects of women's access to resources across countries. Specifically, in Chapter 2, the question "Do more women than men live in households that are in poverty?" is addressed. In Chapter 3, female-headed households are studied closely and their prevalence and vulnerability relative to that of male-headed households is assessed. Also, the characteristics of women who are heads of household are compared to those of women who are not. In Chapter 4, wom-

en's education and exposure to and awareness of the outside world is explored; while in Chapter 5, women's employment and workload across countries is compared. In Chapter 6, the circumstances in which women live as determined by their marital status is described with a special focus on divorced and widowed women. A comparison across countries is also made for age at first marriage, first intercourse, and first birth for women. In Chapter 7, a brief look is taken at the employment and education of husbands on the following two assumptions: 1) the status of women who are married is closely linked to that of their husbands, and 2) large differences in the characteristics of husbands and wives have implications for women's autonomy and status. Finally, in Chapter 8, a threshold measure of women's status is developed based on the findings of previous chapters. This threshold measure is then used to compare the relative position of countries with regard to women's status.

Descriptions of indicators and any theoretical assumptions behind the use of specific indicators are provided separately in each chapter. However, some general guidelines throughout this report are as follows: 1) Respondents with missing values are excluded from each table, unless otherwise noted, and as long as missing values comprise 2 percent or less of the relevant population, they are not reported. 2) In general, a note is made for calculations done on exceptionally small samples, and when the sample size is 25 or less, the statistic is suppressed. 3) Tables based on household level data are calculated on the *de jure* population; however, tables based on individual level data include all women, whether they are usual residents or visitors, unless otherwise noted. 4) On the area of residence variable, women are coded as living in urban or rural areas according to whether the household they were interviewed in was coded as urban or rural. This implies that visitors are also coded on this variable according to the household in which they were interviewed rather than their actual area of residence. 5) Only in Colombia, visitors are assigned the socioeconomic status of the household in which they were interviewed because the relevant data at the individual level were not collected. 6) The term "adult" refers to persons age 15 or more years. Finally, 7) the level of education is a standardized variable with the following categories: none, primary, secondary and higher. While "none" corresponds to 0 years of formal education in all countries, the number of years needed to complete primary, secondary and higher levels of education vary across countries (Appendix Table

A.1). In countries where the educational system does not fit naturally within this standardized categorization of education, "this variable is constructed as accurately as possible from the country's own scheme" (Macro International Inc., 1994).

Table 1.1 lists the countries included in this report with the year of fieldwork and household and individual sample sizes. Not all of these countries have information on all variables used in this report; consequently, some countries may be excluded from some tables. In addition, Table 1.2 provides selected economic, social and demographic background information for these countries. These data reveal large variations in the economic and social conditions across the 25 developing countries included in this study.

## 1.1 DEFINING WOMEN'S STATUS

Despite the empirical feasibility of comparing women's status across countries afforded by the availability of DHS data, there is some doubt as to whether cross-country comparisons of women's status are at all meaningful. One reason for this is that there is no accepted definition of women's status; terms such as women's empowerment, female autonomy, gender inequality, access to and control over resources and even prestige have all been used to define women's status in the literature (Mason, 1986). While women's power, prestige, autonomy, and resource control generally vary together, contributing not only separately but also interactively to the status of women, there are circumstances when contradictions between definitions may arise.

**Table 1.1 Survey characteristics**

Year of fieldwork and sample sizes, Demographic and Health Surveys, 1990-1994

Country	Year of fieldwork	Number of households	Total de jure household population	Female respondents age 15-49	
				Type of women	Number of women
<b>Sub-Saharan Africa</b>					
Burkina Faso	1992/93	5,143	34,203	All women	6,354
Cameroon	1991	3,538	19,783	All women	3,871
Ghana	1993	5,822	21,900	All women	4,562
Kenya	1993	7,950	38,096	All women	7,540
Madagascar	1992	5,944	30,732	All women	6,260
Malawi	1992	5,323	23,743	All women	4,850
Namibia	1992	4,101	24,602	All women	5,421
Niger	1992	5,242	32,851	All women	6,503
Nigeria	1990	8,999	48,438	All women	8,781
Rwanda	1992	6,252	31,076	All women	6,551
Senegal	1992/93	3,528	31,168	All women	6,310
Zambia	1992	6,209	34,808	All women	7,060
<b>North Africa</b>					
Egypt	1992	10,760	60,623	Ever married women	8,911
Morocco	1992	6,577	39,588		9,256
<b>Asia/Near East</b>					
Bangladesh	1993/94	9,174	49,895	Ever married women <sup>1</sup>	9,864
Indonesia	1991	26,858	124,486	Ever married women	22,909
Pakistan	1990/91	7,193	48,430	Ever married women	6,611
Philippines	1993	12,995	69,205	All women	15,029
Turkey	1993	8,619	38,710	Ever married women	6,519
<b>Latin America/Caribbean</b>					
Bolivia	1993/94	9,114	40,926	All women	8,603
Brazil (NE)	1991	6,064	28,764	All women	6,222
Colombia	1990	7,412	31,339	All women	8,644
Dominican Republic	1991	7,144	32,827	All women	7,320
Paraguay	1990	5,827	28,695	All women	5,827
Peru	1991/92	13,479	70,756	All women	15,882

<sup>1</sup> The sample for Bangladesh also includes ever married females ages 10-15. However, in this report, in order to make the sample comparable, the 10-15 age group is excluded.

**Table 1.2 Economic, social, and demographic characteristics of countries**

Selected economic, social, and demographic characteristics of countries, Demographic and Health Surveys, 1990-1994, and United Nations, 1995

Country	GNP per capita (1992 U.S. dollars) <sup>1</sup>	Rural population (percentage of total population) <sup>1</sup>	Life expectancy at birth <sup>1</sup>	Total fertility rate <sup>2</sup>	Infant mortality rate <sup>2</sup>
<b>Sub-Saharan Africa</b>					
Burkina Faso	310	78	47.4	6.9	94
Cameroon	830	58	56.0	5.8	65
Ghana	460	65	56.0	5.5	66
Kenya	330	75	55.7	5.4	62
Madagascar	230	75	56.5	6.1	93
Malawi	230	88	45.6	6.7	134
Namibia	1,670	66	58.8	5.4	57
Niger	290	84	46.5	7.4	123
Nigeria	330	63	50.4	6.0	87
Rwanda	250	94	47.3	6.2	85
Senegal	780	59	49.3	6.0	68
Zambia	370	58	48.9	6.5	107
<b>North Africa</b>					
Egypt	650	56	63.6	3.9	62
Morocco	1,050	53	63.3	4.0	57
<b>Asia/Near East</b>					
Bangladesh	220	83	55.6	3.4	87
Indonesia	680	67	62.7	2.9	57
Pakistan	420	67	61.5	5.4	91
Philippines	790	49	66.3	4.1	34
Turkey	2,030	36	66.5	2.7	53
<b>Latin America/Caribbean</b>					
Bolivia	750	42	59.4	4.8	75
Brazil (NE)	2,810	24	66.3	3.7	75
Colombia	1,350	29	69.3	2.9	27
Dominican Republic	1,070	38	69.6	3.3	43
Paraguay	1,410	49	70.0	4.7	34
Peru	1,350	29	66.0	3.5	55

<sup>1</sup> Source: United Nations (1995a). Data refers to 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Source: DHS individual country reports. Rates are for the year in which the DHS survey was held in the country (Table 1.1). TFRs are based on the 3 years preceding the survey except for Ghana (5 years), Niger and Pakistan (6 years) and Turkey (1 year). IMRs are based on the 5 years preceding the survey except for Pakistan (6 years) and Brazil (10 years).

For example, the practice of "purdah" may increase women's prestige in a given society, while simultaneously reducing women's direct access to resources. In addition, women's status is multifaceted making it difficult to measure uniquely; not only can it vary along different dimensions such as decision-making power, freedom of movement, access to education, etc., but it can also vary between the different spheres in which women function, such as the domestic and nondomestic (Mason, 1986; Whyte, 1978). This implies that women may score high on one dimension of women's status while simultaneously scoring low on another; they could also have high status in one sphere of opera-

tion but not in another. This multidimensionality confounds attempts at comparing women's status across countries because the different dimensions of women's status need to be aggregated using a weighting scheme deemed to be uniformly applicable to all countries. The interaction of the cultural context and the cogency of different indicators of women's status also adds to the confusion since factors that contribute to high status in one cultural setting may have no relevance or may even lower women's status in another. For example, the practice of consanguineous marriages appears to correlate positively with women's higher status in the southern states of India (Dyson and Moore, 1983), but the

same factor is cited as a reflection of women's lower status in the Middle East (Moghadam, 1992).

These hazards of cross-country comparisons of women's status do not, however, negate attempts to measure women's status. Instead, they provide some guidelines for such comparisons. Specifically, they suggest that comparisons be made in terms of the different dimensions of women's status, that the assumptions made when aggregating across dimensions be explicitly specified, and that special attention be paid to ensuring that the indicators selected for the comparison are unambiguous across cultures.

In this report, these guidelines for analyzing women's status are utilized in the following ways:

- The assumptions underlying the use of any given indicator for the comparison of women's status are carefully elucidated. The careful specification of assumptions helps make explicit any cultural biases in the use of the indicator, and makes it easier to determine whether the indicator is irrelevant, or culturally inappropriate in any country.
- Whenever possible, indicators are defined in terms of gender differentials. Not only do gender differentials measure gender equality, an essential aspect of women's status, but they minimize cross-cultural ambiguity on the following two counts: 1) an indicator measuring the difference in women's and men's access to resources in the same country allows the cross-country comparison to be made in terms of these differences, and a "large" or "small" difference is likely to mean the same across cultures; and, 2) comparisons made in terms of gender differentials have the advantage in that they standardize for within-country socioeconomic conditions by comparing the women's situation with that of men in the same country. Standardization is important since the level of any given indicator is generally not determined by the gender stratification system alone, but is also influenced by factors unrelated to gender, which may vary across countries. Thus, conclusions based on the position of women alone, although critical from a human rights perspective, may be misleading as indicators of gender inequality. For example, if literacy of women in country A is very low as compared with country B, one might be tempted to conclude, at least in terms of this indicator, that women in country A have lower status than those in country B. However, if the illiteracy rate for men and women in country A is about the same, but the illiteracy rate of men in country B is much lower than that of women in country B, then the correct conclusion is the reverse—women's status, at least as measured by literacy, is lower in country B than in A.
- Given the multidimensional nature of women's status, as many dimensions as possible are compared.
- Finally, the threshold measure of women's status defined in this report is based only on indicators drawn from a detailed discussion of each separate dimension of women's status. Justification and assumptions underlying the use of each of the indicators included in the threshold measure are provided. Care is also taken to alert users to the limitations of the measure.