



# Eleonora Masini on the empowerment of women

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## Abstract

Eleonora Barbieri Masini's lifetime contributions as visionary sociologist and pioneering futurist are well known. Less well known, perhaps, are her roles as *vital catalyst* in organizing comparative research on the role and status of women and as *activist leader* in efforts to end the exploitation and subordination of women and to create a future world of equality, freedom, and social justice. In this article, examples of Masini's work on—and for—the empowerment of women are given.

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## 1. Introduction

My mother used to tell me, 'Every problem is an opportunity'. It is an aphorism that has helped me cope with many of the inevitable disappointments and disasters that, from time to time, we all confront. Until recently, however, it never occurred to me that the main 'problem' my mother faced was me. My mother, then a young, divorced, and displaced woman in the middle of an economic depression, must have been searching in her needy and demanding son for some hopeful signs of opportunity.

This belated revelation struck me recently reading the work of Eleonora Barbieri Masini on the changing role and status of women and on women's efforts to achieve freedom, equality, and social justice.

Let's face it: women usually get the short end of the stick. Biology traps them in their reproductive role, while men can sow their seeds and sometimes move on. Months of pregnancy burden them. The risks of childbirth endanger their lives. Nature, society, and culture conspire to thrust the tasks of childcare upon them, feeding, clothing, and protecting their young children. Custom chains them to household tasks, such as preparing food and cleaning, and expects them to shoulder the burdens of caring for the sick and the

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elderly. Economic change and development, at least in the short run, may add to their burdens as they accept paid jobs in the labor force, which for poor women in developing areas usually means very low wages. Finally, tradition, especially in developing areas, forces women into subservience to men who make many of the decisions that shape their lives.

These are some of the issues with which Eleonora Barbieri Masini's work deals. She has what can rightly be called 'a passionate commitment' to understand and improve the lives of women. Toward these ends, she has organized empirical social research by women about women in many countries throughout the world. Fully engaging the future, she has promoted social action by encouraging cooperative efforts among international groups of women to bring an end to the exploitation and subordination of women and to work for a future of women's freedom and well-being. And for all humanity, she encourages women to work for a future world of ecological balance, peace, friendship, love, and solidarity among people [1].

In this article, I discuss a few of Masini's contributions to the study of the changing role and status of women as well as some of her efforts to help women take control of their own futures.

## **2. Women, households and change**

### *2.1. Purposes*

One example of Masini's work is *Women, Households and Change* [2], which she co-edited with Susan Stratigos. It reports a series of cross-national empirical studies focused on socio-economic development and women's lives. It is innovative in looking at the relationships between societal and individual change over time, showing not only how women are affected by social changes, but also how women themselves act to shape change.

Masini served as coordinator of the project, which was sponsored by the United Nations University, from 1981 to 1992. As such, she played a key role in planning the project, guiding it through various phases, and, finally, co-editing a book reporting the results of the research. Data were collected by households in Colombia, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Sri Lanka, China, and Kenya, mostly from women but also to a lesser extent from men, within the context of the relevant macro historical events in each country.

In Colombia, e.g., the macro context was the demographic transition, the transformation from high to low birth and death rates and a dramatic increase in life expectancies. In Sri Lanka, four macro changes were explored: (1) an irrigation and power project that impacted a village, (2) a model village development scheme, (3) new jobs in the Free Trade or Export Processing Zone, and (4) the migration of Sri Lankan women to West Asia for employment. Also, to take a final example, in Brazil and Argentina the researchers focused on technological change among female textile workers.

The methods included the life-course approach with comparisons of women of different age cohorts as well as detailed time budgets to chart the micro changes in women's daily lives. With a focus on the household, the researchers, additionally, collected data on relationships, the division of responsibilities, education, health, and socio-economic status within the context of the macro changes that were affecting the women's lives.

Masini and the research teams aimed to illuminate the current needs and future potential of women so as to beneficially influence decision makers and their design of social policies. They also aimed to highlight often overlooked facts, such as women's subsistence activities and participation in the informal economic sector, women's concentration in the lowest-paid sectors or industries and their lower pay than men for equivalent work, and the economic value of women's unpaid domestic and community work [3].

## 2.2. *Some findings*

Of course, both within and between countries, there are differences comparing some women to others. Yet there are also similarities. For example, women everywhere, compared to men, have a more complex life course. Women must juggle reproduction, child rearing, and other work in shifting patterns from decade to decade. Also, despite economic and social changes, women remain dominated by men—by their fathers, husbands, employers, and authority figures in their communities.

Every study reveals the old story of women's double workload. Since they remain stuck with reproduction and domestic maintenance, 'employment outside the home frequently doubles the working hours of women' [4]. At the same time, the studies show that 'changes in the power structure within households and in the domestic division of labor take place much more slowly in developing countries than other changes related to the participation of women in the labor force' [5].

Although younger women generally had more education, better jobs, and more control of their fertility than their mothers, middle- and upper-class women were benefited more than were lower-class women [4].

Yet there is hope for the future, because in the countries studied, as in many other countries in the developing world, women were having fewer children, more of their children were living into adulthood, and women themselves were living longer as life expectancies increased. Thus, an increasing number of women was gaining freedom from a life of having babies and caring for children, and more and more women were finding time to have at least a part of their lives of their own choosing.

To take a few specific examples, in Colombia we see in detail how poverty made women's situation more difficult; how urban women in higher socio-economic groups, especially younger ones, were beginning to question traditional perceptions and were redefining their lives; and how women's education was important in reducing women's fertility, delaying their age at marriage, and increasing their labor-force participation [6].

In Brazil and Argentina, working women reported that their wages were very necessary for their family's survival, while fewer men acknowledged it (or perhaps even perceived it). A few households, contrary to the general findings, had more children precisely so that they could go to work at a young age and contribute to the household income [7].

In Chile, educational attainment was important in determining average earnings; the educational gap between low-income and higher-income women was narrowing; as elsewhere, women's increased access to education and family planning was making a difference: younger women were better educated, delayed marriage and childbearing, and had fewer total children than older women [8].

In Sri Lanka, considerable change had taken place—as in the case of the Irrigated Village—but, so far, it meant even more burdens heaped upon women: the new agriculture resulted in year-round work schedules, the evaporation of community help, and the

migration of young girls who go off to school instead of helping their mothers (which, of course, will probably be good for the future lives of the young girls). Yet, even though women and their households had been wracked with changes with which the women had to cope, traditional male dominance remained firmly in place [9].

In China, the focus was on the economic reforms since 1979 and, to a lesser extent, on the land reform of the early 1950s. The rural structural reforms introduced in 1979 included a new plan that allowed farmers to keep their surplus for themselves (to sell if they chose) after they sold a contracted amount of their production to the state. The consequences were startling, including greatly increased efficiency of agricultural production and a boost in farmers' motivation to work. Moreover, the increased economic activity resulted in the development of village and township enterprises and the increased employment for rural paid laborers, including women [10].

Three cohorts of rural women—old, middle-aged, and young—were studied in two provinces, Jiangsu and Sichuan. There have been dramatic changes. For example, illiterates among the old amounted to 79.9% compared to only 11.8% among the middle-aged and a mere 0.5% among the young.

The amount of schooling also went up among the middle and young cohorts, but, contrary to expectations, there was a decline in years of schooling among the very youngest women (those aged 17–21 compared to those aged 22–27) [10]. The causes seem clear: the economic reforms produced increased economic activity among adults, leaving much housework to young girls some of whom dropped out of school. Also, there was greed among some of the farmers who, thinking only of short-term gains, put their daughters to work in income-generating activities rather than sending them to school.

In Kenya, studies were done on coffee and tea plantations, the main source of Kenya's foreign exchange. In the short run, the results are not encouraging for the equality of women. 'All except a handful [of respondents] declared that working on a plantation was a miserable life, oppressive and exploitative. The workload was too heavy and the pay too little even to cover basic needs' [11].

Two-thirds of the women perceived education as important, a path to better job opportunities, yet most of them had only rudimentary literacy and numeracy; older women even lacked these. In general, although the researchers found some evidence of changing gender attitudes (toward somewhat more equality for women), for the most part the age-old patriarchal discrimination against women remained. The double load of housework and employment imposed heavy burdens on women, some of whom stretched their day by rising as early as 4:00 AM and working a 15- to 18-h day.

Development has done little to improve the lives of these plantation workers. Yet some women, despite the wretchedness of their own lives, were hopeful about their children's future [11].

### 2.3. *Hai Zhang Tou: an old woman who was once a slave*

I am not able to do justice here to the nuances, complexities, and full import of the studies briefly summarized above. Collectively, they constitute an exemplar of futures research. Also, they give information to decision makers so that their social policies will be more effective and more attuned to the relevant social realities that their actions are designed to alter. Each of the country research projects deserves to have its findings studied in detail.

In addition to the statistical results, some of the researchers give examples from the lives of individual women. This is notably so in the case of the researchers in China who give stories of five Tibetan women; one, named Hai Zhang Tou, was 65 yr old during the data collection in 1988.

Hai Zhang Tou's parents were serfs working on land rented from a tribal chief, to whom they owed half of their harvest and their labor for 15 days every month. When she was 5 yr old, her father died. At six, she was working, helping her mother herd cattle, caring for her younger brother and sister, and doing chores in the household. At 13, her mother died of typhoid fever.

Separated from her brother and sister, she was given to the tribal chief by her uncle to work as a slave. There she lived on the ground floor of a three-story house along with the livestock, sleeping on the ground, which in winter was ice-cold, under worn animal skins. She worked in the household, was expected to kowtow to the mistress who frequently beat and kicked her, and suffered many indignities (including having to get down on her hands and knees to serve as a mounting block for the master when he mounted his horse) [10].

At age 19, she fell in love with a peasant boy and, finally, at age 23, she got the tribal chief's permission to marry him. Because she was a slave, however, there was no elaborate ceremony, no new clothes, or no celebration of drinks and dancing. She kept on working.

In 1950, things began to change for Hai Zhang Tou, as they did for others in her village. Her hometown was liberated and some of the tribal chiefs fled. The government gave the people, including her and her husband, farm implements, seed, cattle, and relief funds. Making more reforms, the government in 1956 also gave land to her and her family, which now included children.

Hai Zhang Tou became an active leader in the village, becoming head of a women's committee, despite the fact that she was illiterate. At the time of the study, although she was retired, she remained an adviser to the new leaders of the committee.

In all, she had three sons and one daughter whom she and her husband tried their best to educate. Three finished primary school or secondary-vocational school. At the time of the study, she and her husband had ten grandchildren.

Despite her past as a slave, Hai Zhang Tou was a happy woman at the time of the study. Her husband was still alive and healthy enough, as she was, to help with the farm and household work in their second son's household, where they lived comfortably with him, his wife, and four children. Their eldest son, who was quite well off and had built a new house, helped them with pocket money. All their children treated them well.

The personal history of Hai Zhang Tou, and those of the other women treated in detail, put a human face on the statistics that make up much of these reports. They also illustrate both macro changes in creating more gender equality and the tenacity and ingenuity of women themselves who, despite cultural norms of the exploitation of women, find ways to endure terrible burdens and sometimes to empower themselves in their personal lives.

Masini's work with women, though, goes beyond research and moves into social action with such projects as the Women's International Network (WIN), Emergency and Solidarity.

### **3. Women changing their own lives: WIN**

Since 1995, Eleonora Barbieri Masini has served as coordinator of WIN, Emergency and Solidarity, a project started by UNESCO and, eventually, supported by additional

sponsors, including the European Community. It is an effort to bring together women's groups from all over the world, especially from Third World regions, that aim to tackle major issues of women's roles for the purpose of bringing about radical changes in women's conditions in all sectors of social life [12]. Masini has played a leading role in this activist, organizing work, which aims 'to show, that contrary to a main way of thinking women are not only victims but are also social actors and some time major players in a world that is on continuous change and characterized by turbulence' [13].

Members of WIN work to reconstruct social structures, particularly those that have been destroyed by natural disasters or by wars or violent conflicts of all kinds. They aim to let women know that there are others who share both their sufferings and their struggles to overcome them, so that they can draw life and meaning from one another. They aim to give women courage, visibility, and contacts to tie together groups of women working for women in a global network [13].

Some of the problems the women's groups have confronted and some of the countries in which they have worked include: the aftermath of an earthquake in Iran; years of war and the struggle for secularism, freedom, and social justice in Afghanistan; deadly conflict and harsh life conditions in Palestine; civil war in Algeria; genocide and its aftermath in Rwanda; violence, torture, and murder in Colombia; bloody civil war, an earthquake, and a hurricane in El Salvador; and women's struggle against the Mafia and all forms of violence in Sicily [14].

An amazing number of such women's groups exist and Masini and her colleagues have brought them together in a directory [14]. The groups listed are created by women for women, operate in emergency situations, function in a spirit of solidarity among women, have been created informally and on women's own initiative, and carry out their activities recreating destroyed social structures and building a kinder, less violent, and more just world with no formal support from governments or intergovernmental organizations.

The specific, down-to-earth stories of these groups and their accomplishments inspire us to believe what in the abstract may sound like empty rhetoric: it *is* possible for ordinary people to work together and successfully shape their own future.

#### 4. Conclusion

As a futurist, I have learned from Eleonora Barbieri Masini's work for more than a quarter century. As a sociologist, I have been most familiar with—and perhaps most influenced by—her efforts to bring futures thinking into sociology and to make sociologists aware of the important relevance of the principles of futures studies to sociological work [15–18].

Yet her life's work goes far beyond trying to improve the sociological perspective. It includes many other accomplishments and reveals the many influential roles she has played. She is, e.g., a pioneering futurist, being among the handful of people who began to forge a new field of social inquiry, futures studies, and has continued to contribute as the field has matured and blossomed. She is an organizer and a leader—witness her role, e.g., in the World Futures Studies Federation. She is a scholar, a master teacher, and an activist. Most of all, perhaps, she is a creative visionary who capably works to transform her visions of a better future into social reality.

All of these facets of her genius can be seen in her work with and for women. Characteristically, she combines rigorous research on important social issues with plans for

action. This can be seen in the studies she organized on the role and status of women and in her efforts to encourage women to take control of their own lives. While, on the one hand, she documents the systematic subordination of women in the past and present, she creates, on the other hand, a vision of a possible and preferable future of more equality, more freedom, and more social justice for women. She works to fulfill the vision by helping to establish an international women's movement of cooperative efforts as one link in a chain leading to a global civil society within which women will be full and equal participants. She promotes solidarity and action among women throughout the world based on their common humanity, shared sorrows, and similar hopes.

But her writings are not only for women. Men, as well, can learn from them. For example, they can learn from her universal calls for peace, environmental balance, more spiritual meaning to life, and solidarity among all people. Also, men can learn to see and understand the world—and themselves—through the eyes of women. It is not only a sociologically fuller and more nuanced picture of the social world, but it is also one that encourages men to be more sensitive to the needs and aspirations of women.

No doubt some—perhaps many—men view the struggle of women for equality as a problem, as a threat to themselves and their traditional authority and privileges.

Well, I know what my mother, were she still alive, would say to them, 'Look guys, every problem is an opportunity'.

It is an opportunity to have more full and satisfying relationships with the women in your life. Especially in your relationship with your wife, take the opportunity to listen to her. Take her hopes and wishes into account. Be an understanding friend, a generous helpmate, and a loyal companion. Work with her to build a lifelong, mutually satisfying joint life based on reciprocity, genuine equality, and consideration for her life choices and personal growth. Take the opportunity to enjoy the satisfactions of a life of mutual love and caring with an equal and autonomous partner.

That, my mother would say, is a win-win opportunity, because, if—or when—women lead better lives, boys and men will benefit, too, as women share their enriched selves with them. It is also a message that is fully confirmed by Eleonora Barbieri Masini's work on the empowerment of women.

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