

occasional paper no. 3  
world summit for social development

*is there a crisis  
in the family?*

*by henrietta moore*



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geneva, july 1994

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## preface

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The agenda for the upcoming World Summit for Social Development includes three major items: the reduction of poverty, the generation of productive employment, and the enhancement of social integration. The work being undertaken by UNRISD in preparation for the Social Summit focuses on the last of these: as countries confront the seemingly intractable problems of social conflicts, institutional breakdown and mass alienation, the topic of social integration has assumed increasing importance in public debate.

The series of UNRISD Occasional Papers brought out as part of the preparatory process for the Social Summit reflects research carried out on a range of issues that affect social integration. This paper takes up the question, "Is there a crisis in the family?" There is a widespread perception at the present time that something has gone wrong with the family: the purpose of this paper is to examine how processes of social, economic and political change are affecting family forms, gender relations and family-market linkages. It identifies globalisation, increasing market integration, and the changing nature of labour markets as the macro-economic forces which produce strain on intra-household resource allocation, conjugal relations and child care and socialisation. In the context of increasingly unified and deregulated markets for capital and labour, people within vulnerable countries and those within vulnerable groups must maintain family relations and livelihoods from a diminished resource base.

This paper identifies the care of children and the reproduction of human capital as the main issues to be addressed by those interested in the family. It makes three main arguments: First, nation states in the developed world are finding the cost of welfare programmes hard to meet, and are alarmed by the speed and scale with which these costs are projected to rise. In this context, the debate about the family is one of the mechanisms through which the relationships between the family, the market and the state are being redefined.

Second, the rise in female-headed households is among the most important of the recent changes which have taken place in household and family structure, and these households have thus become a focus of policy debate. Research shows that women shoulder a disproportionate share of the costs of childcare and the reproduction of human capital, and the disadvantages of female-headed households provide graphic evidence of this fact. The difficulties faced by many female-headed households are not due to the fact that they are dysfunctional families, but are rather attributable to the discrimination women suffer in the labour market and the unequal distribution of labour and income within families. Because public transfer programmes world-wide favour families with employed male

breadwinners, they effectively divert resources away from the families most in need.

Third, the supposed indicators of family crisis — marital conflict, youth crime, disadvantaged children and single mothers — are not simply the result of dysfunctional families, but must also be seen in the context of the strain placed on certain family relations and categories of individuals by poverty and extreme economic hardship. It is the lack of control over their lives that forces many disadvantaged families into situations where personal relations break down under stress.

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July 1994

Dharam Ghai  
Director

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