Pragmatists or Feminists? The Professional 'Single' Women of Accra, Ghana.
Madame Carmel Dinan

Résumé
C. Dinan - Pragmatistes ou féministes ? Femmes célibataires cadres à Accra. L'effet de l'urbanisation sur le statut des femmes africaines divise les observateurs entre « optimistes » et « pessimistes », leurs conclusions paraissant souvent impressionnistes et entachées d'ethnocentrisme. L'auteur a donc préféré aborder le sujet dans la perspective de la stratégie des rôles et intentions. Elle étudie dix-sept cas de femmes akan, célibataires ou divorcées, occupant des emplois supérieurs ou exerçant des professions libérales. Dans un système de valeurs qui continue à privilégier le mariage et la maternité, le célibat reste un choix temporaire qui permet à ces femmes de renforcer leur position dans leur lignage, surtout du côté de la parentèle féminine. Tout compte fait, la modernisation paraît avoir, pour ce groupe restreint, un effet objectivement bénéfique.

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The Professional ‘Single’ Women of Accra, Ghana

This article is offered as a further contribution to the growing body of data on the status of women in the urban African environment. It attempts to take up the question raised by Schwarz (1972) and Little (1975a) as to whether the condition of African women has been improved or worsened by modernization and a movement to the cities.

Two schools of thought have emerged on this issue which Schwarz labels ‘optimistic’ or ‘pessimistic’ depending on the viewpoint taken by the authors with regard to women’s ‘improvement’ under urban conditions. The ‘Optimists’ feel, generally, that urban living has improved women’s position; that the city offers them wider occupational options (Baker and Bird 1959: 99) and hence greater scope for financial independence (Ardener 1961: 94); higher standards of living (Southall 1961: 46); greater freedom to assert their economic and sexual independence from husbands (McCall 1961: 298) or, given the favourable sex imbalance of the cities, greater scope for selectivity should they decide on marital or quasi-marital partners (Gugler 1972: 292; Southall 1961: 53); and, overall, greater possibilities for personal emancipation from male-dominated traditional family systems (Mayer 1971: 233-234).

The opposite point of view, that represented by the ‘Pessimists’, holds, on the other hand, that the urban milieu has eroded the traditionally powerful position of African women and that urbanization has introduced new positions of subjection and dependence for them (Schwarz 1972: 188, 191); that unequal educational and economic opportunities result in the preferential employment of men (Gugler 1972: 293, 299); that the majority of women, in consequence of this sexual discrimination, have

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few real occupational options apart from petty trading, formal or informal prostitution and illicit brewing (Boserup 1970: 85-105, 157; Pons 1969: 214; Southall 1961: 58); that urban feminine roles have crystallised in sexual and domestic areas in contrast to the important ‘public’ roles they played in traditional society (Pons 1969: 218); that urban women, generally, are regarded as unmarried because of the negative male evaluation of city women as being sexually loose (Boserup 1970: 99-103, 157; Schwarz 1972: 202-203); that unmarried women are regarded by men as prostitutes whether true or not (Wipper 1972b: 339) and that the general stereotype of city women is that they are superficial, pleasure-seeking and work-shy (ibid.).

The protagonists of the ‘pessimistic’ line of argument tend to take as their basis for comparison the status of women in traditional society where, they say, women enjoyed a measure of economic, legal and political equality with men (Fortes 1971: 8); that the division of labour in precolonial subsistence economies placed the main burden of food production on women (UNECA 1972: 362); that this resulted in a complementary rather than subordinate position for women vis-à-vis men as each had equal need of the other (Little 1973: 6); that their economic status in such economies was high as women could maintain control over their own self-acquired property (Paulme 1963: 5); that women had their own political associations where they could promote their own specific interests as opposed to those of men and could act collectively against them when necessary (Van Allen 1972: 169-170); that in some societies women actually held high political office with powers to enthrone or dethrone a chief, as in Ghana, and that they played an active military role (Omari 1960: 210).

The high status of women in these societies became progressively modified primarily by external factors, the most important of which being the advent of the colonial era—generally taken to mark the starting point in the deterioration of women’s status and the erosion of their rights. Some writers argue that the ideological infiltration of Western values and norms into indigenous cultures was even more important than actual conquest in this down-grading process (Brain 1975; Van Allen 1972: 176; UNECA 1972: 360-361). Western colonialists were apparently imbued with Victorian ideas and assumptions about ‘proper’ male and female roles (Van Allen 1972: 165-166, 180-181); their definition of the female role was that found in their metropolitan Victorian society of origin and carried more limited expectations of female possibilities than was behaviourally true in the societies being colonised; such a definition concentrated largely on domestic and social rather than on economic (UNECA 1972: 360) and political (Van Allen 1972: 165, 180-181) roles. The result was that colonial officers tended to ignore the significant economic and political roles of women and the colonial reforms undermined the women’s thriving political associations with a consequent weakening of female political power (ibid.: 177-178).
Such colonial attitudes of male supremacy are thought by the ‘Pessimists’ to have been further reinforced by the Christian missionaries who, in their educational endeavours, placed greater emphasis on turning out Christian wives and mothers than on equipping a woman for an economic or civic role. The women’s associations—the locus of their political power—were also undermined by conversion to Christianity as membership required avoidance of the pagan rituals which were a basic requirement in membership of these associations (Van Allen 179).

European technical advisors, coming in the wake of the colonialists, also apparently carried this narrow definition of the female role with its assumption that agricultural work was not naturally a woman’s job. This resulted in women being neglected when modern farming technics were introduced, and thus excluded from lucrative cash-crop agriculture despite their traditional heavy involvement in subsistence production, food processing and the retailing of such products (UNECA 1972: 369; Boserup 1970: 55). The redistribution of tasks resulting from the introduction of improved agricultural technics worked to the women’s disadvantage: with men monopolizing the modern agricultural machinery, the productivity gap between men and women widened, with a resultant decline in women’s relative status within agriculture (Paulme 1963: 8; Boserup 1970: 53). In the later era of development aid they were ignored by development planners, under-utilized in development programmes and denied the opportunity to acquire the skills which would have enabled them to enjoy the benefits of modernization (UNECA 1972: 368).

Some writers tend to the opinion that this exclusion of women from political and economic involvement was not a policy of conscious discrimination against women but resulted from the ethnocentricism of the colonialists, who were unable to entertain an alternative conception of the female role (Van Allen 1972: 176; UNECA 1972: 360). Others writers, however, are inclined to the view that the neglect of women may have been more deliberate. One author argues that it was the colonial administrators’ ‘covert envy’ of African men which was behind their being ignored, noting that: ‘Most European men serving in Africa tend to envy African men for their much more overt position of dominance, their ability to take several wives, and their ability to divorce them without too much difficulty.’ (Brain 1975: 44.) A conspiracy theory involving Western and African men is offered by another writer who suggests that African women were up against ‘a kind of coalition between Western and African men about what their roles should be’ (Wipper 1972a: 145).

Western feminists have also entered into this debate and unequivocally come down on the ‘pessimistic’ side regarding women in the Third World as the real ‘wretched of the earth’ (Rowbotham 1972: 202). Such writers tend to take a more activist stand and explicitly set themselves the task of attempting to improve African women’s social status, helping them to foster a better self-image (Pool 1972: 233). These authors see the development of a feminist consciousness as a prerequisite for their
liberation and urge that 'women in the colonized countries articulate a revolutionary feminist consciousness' in order to 'shatter this legacy of humiliation and domination left them by their colonial masters' (Rowbotham 1972: 206).

The 'pessimistic' line of argument is persuasive up to a degree but there would seem to be a tendency, on the part of some writers, to pursue this line of reasoning even when faced with empirical evidence which points to the opposite direction. An example from the writing of one of these authors illustrates this. Alf Schwarz (1972), reporting on his research amongst female Zairian factory workers, notes that they themselves perceived salaried work as being their 'salvation'. He describes their expressions of praise for it and records that they reported that work enabled them to be financially independent; that it afforded them self-respect and that their status had been elevated to the point where they felt that they could be treated like a man (ibid.: 208). Nevertheless, despite such strong evidence from the women themselves that work enables them to maintain their self-respect and independence, A. Schwarz concluded that the women are suffering from a false consciousness; that they are deluded and indulging in self-deception; that they are living in a fantasy world, attempting to dismiss from their consciousness their feelings of disgrace and exclusion; that their stand is an elaborate pretence, gross wishful thinking which struggles to give meaning to an otherwise degrading existence (ibid.: 208-209). Unless Schwarz's views are derived from unquoted data, it is unclear how he arrives at such a 'pessimistic' conclusion about the women he was studying.

The notion propounded by Western feminists that Third World women have been subordinated, humiliated and dominated (Rowbotham 1972: 206) is one not always subscribed to by African writers themselves. It is, moreover, a notion that they resent, implying, as it does, that African women are passive, submissive creatures, incapable of looking after their own interests. As one African writer remarked: 'Probably no single charge about the nature of traditional African society has animated Africans more than the idea commonly held by most foreigners that the African woman is dominated and used as a beast of burden, and is generally a pliable person.' (Mutiso 1971: 4.)

There is some evidence to suggest that the activist stance taken by a number of feminist writers and their attempts to advise Third World women on how to liberate themselves, are coming increasingly to be rejected by the women from these societies. Little (1975b) quotes a Nigerian journalist writing in the daily news-sheet circulated at the International Women's Year Conference in Mexico City. The writer was addressing her remarks to a radical feminist from the West present at the Conference: 'It is presumptuous for anyone to presume that women of the Third World are unable to articulate their own outrage at any issue that concerns them. As a member of the Third World, I repudiate this patronising attitude and particularly the underlining
intellectual imperialism. Women in the Third World do not need any more champions. We are bored and tired of any more Great White Hopes.' (Little 1975b: 799.)

If, therefore, neither the macro-historical attempts by the ‘Pessimists’ to plot the deterioration in status of African women, nor the Western feminist model bring us closer to an understanding of their status and roles in a contemporary urban environment, what further models are available? A useful way, it is suggested, of approaching the problem is to conceptualize women as social actors using strategies in structured ways to achieve desired goals. The notion that individuals are social actors who use strategies to achieve goals has been incorporated in the writings of a number of social anthropologists in their analyses of political systems (Leach 1964; Barth 1959, 1966; Bailey 1970) and more recently by Rosaldo and Lamphere (1974) and Little (1975a) in their examination of women’s roles. In this model, the goals that women set themselves are defined by their position within the overall social system and by the resources that they themselves possess. The strategies they use involve attempts to maximize these resources by manipulating the opportunities that they perceive in their environment. Barth, moreover, argues in his theoretical model that the choices and strategies that an individual employs are a response to the wider constraints and incentives within his social environment (Barth 1966: 1).

Such a model would, it seems, limit itself to a description of the social environment within which the women operate; it would pay particular attention to the constraints and incentives in their economic, occupational, political and social worlds. It would also involve an elaboration of the goals of the women and the choices they must make to maximize their chances of attaining them. It would, finally, include a description of the actual strategies being used by the women.

Such an approach has the advantage of placing the emphasis on the women’s own perception of their situation: it sets aside any ethnocentric notions of ‘proper’ women’s roles. It also credits women with being, like men, purposeful social actors actively attempting to control their own social environment and with maximizing their own resources within that environment. It assumes that although women, like men, are constrained by cultural norms, they also evolve their own strategies to cope with oppressive social structures.

This, therefore, is the model chosen for the present analysis of the professional ‘single’ women of Accra, Ghana. The analysis will involve a description of the social environment within which the women operate, with its constraints and incentives; it will include an outline of the goals of these women and will focus on the strategies that they have adopted for their achievement; finally, a return will be made to the question to which this paper has been addressed: have African women gained or lost by modernization and an urban way of life?
No overt sex discrimination exists in Ghana. Women enjoy an equal legal right to education from primary school to university and are free to avail themselves of any type of vocational, professional or academic training (Bannerman 1975: 1-2). However, differential participation rates for boys and girls are clearly evident at all levels of the educational system with a very dramatic decrease in the rate of female participation at each higher stage of the educational process. Figures for 1973-74 show that girls accounted for 43% of the total population enrolled in elementary schools; at the secondary school level this figure had dropped to 28% (Blumenfeld 1975: 123) whilst girls made up only 13% of the total number of students in all three Ghanaian universities (Bannerman 1975: 3 based on 1970-71 figures). Thus, although official policy does not discriminate against women’s participation in the educational system, they, nevertheless, remain at an educational disadvantage and have many fewer opportunities than their male counterparts to acquire the training and skills necessary to avail themselves of the new job openings in the modern sectors of the Ghanaian economy.

Women also have equal rights to participate in the political life of their country; but though they have been highly active in national political movements, they have seldom achieved high political office or due representation for their sex in successive national assemblies. Again, government policy would appear to encourage female participation. Deliberate efforts were made during the First Republic under Nkrumah, from 1960-1966, to get women into the legislature; twelve special seats were created for them and a woman was appointed minister of Education (Greenstreet 1972: 354). Under the Second Republic, however, from 1969-1972, they did not fare so well and only one woman amongst the 140 elected representatives was returned (Little 1973: 211). Since 1972, there has been a return to military government in Ghana and, consequently, there is presently no direct female participation at the highest executive levels in the running of the country.

Nor do legal barriers exist against women in the occupational sphere, and no jobs are specifically reserved for men (North 1975: 3, quoting Ghanaian Appeals Court Judge Annie Jiagge). Women are eligible for all posts in both national and local government service and are eligible for all public appointments. The principle of equal pay for equal work has been accepted in Ghana since 1951 (Greenstreet 1972: 353). In fact, the government has taken the lead in formulating progressive policies in relation to their female employees. Since 1948, female government employees have been entitled to three months maternity leave and presently enjoy such leave with full pay (ibid.). Despite these statutory rights, however, and not unexpectedly given their disadvantaged educational start, women are heavily underrepresented in the modern sector of the Ghanaian economy. The 1960 Census figures reveal that
20% of professional or technical workers were women (Central Bureau of Statistics, *Statistical Year Book 1967-68: 12-28*).

But, although their numbers are still small, women are entering new economic roles and availing themselves of new job opportunities. Also, there is a great variety of new professional occupations in which women are engaged. According to the 1960 Census, women were employed as architects, town planners, civil, mechanical and chemical engineers, surveyors, physical chemists, mathematicians, economists, statisticians, pharmacists as well as in the more typical female professional roles of nurses, midwives, social workers and teachers (*ibid.*). Such a wide proliferation of occupational roles for women had no parallel in traditional rural society and reflects the increased complexity of an urban occupational structure. Women have always played a significant economic role in Ghana, their contribution to agricultural production being equal to, if not greater than, that of men (Hill 1963: 164, 168). They had also carved out quite a reputation for themselves as traders. But, in the past, women operated in a largely subsistence economy and they were obliged, if trading, to give their husbands from between half to two-thirds of their trading profits (Danquah 1928: 154; Amoo 1946: 231; Klingshirn 1971: 155).

But, in these newer urban occupations, women are now wage and salary earners in their own right with money going directly into their own hands. The result is that it is now possible for such salary earners to support themselves directly by their own occupational endeavours and maintain their own economic independence. This new freedom for women to earn their living outside their lineage and in independence from husbands, would seem to offer tremendous opportunities to women to be independent from men. Such women would now be faced with the option of marrying or remaining single and attempting to maintain their own economic and personal emancipation.

But, despite the important economic contribution of women in traditional society, it was for their roles as mothers and wives that they were most valued. Even in modern Ghana, this high evaluation of childbearing (Klingshirn 1971: 30) and marriage (*ibid.*: 68) still prevails: wedlock and the production of children still remain prescribed roles for women. Thus, even where women attain professional success and economic self-sufficiency, they are still expected to have husbands. Yet, despite the fact that the status of being ‘single’ is not likely to earn them social approval, there is emerging in urban Ghana an increasingly large number of women who have decided to break with the traditionally defined roles of wives and mothers for as long as possible and are choosing to retain their ‘single’ status.

For the remainder of this paper, it is proposed to concentrate on these ‘single’ women and, more specifically, on ‘single’ women in professional occupations. It shall be argued, moreover, that despite the prevailing sex role asymmetry in both political and economic life, these
professional 'single' women have achieved a remarkable degree of independence from men. Secondly, an attempt will be made to explain the underlying logic behind this choice by looking at the perceived constraints on marriage as expressed by the women. Finally, it will be suggested that this is achieved by two main strategies—in the first instance by postponing marriage and by concentrating instead on the build-up of their own careers and economic resources and, in the second, by consolidating their positions within their own extended family groups.

The findings are based on fieldwork carried out in Accra over a fifteen-month period 1974-75. The methodology involved a systematic random sample of houses in a typical mixed residential area of urban Accra; this provided a sampling frame for a subsequent sub-sample of 'single' women ('single' was taken to include all women presently unmarried regardless of any former marital or quasi-marital status): eighty-seven women turned up as 'single' in the sample. Of this number, seventeen were engaged in professional occupations and are the group to be considered. The method of study combined prolonged first-hand direct observational and participatory techniques in addition to 'free interviews' with all of the seventeen women.

Demographic Characteristics of the Population

Some brief demographic data relating to the seventeen women will first be introduced. They evidenced a wide range of occupational differentiation and included a doctor, a lawyer, two principals of girls vocational schools, a public relations officer, a journalist, a radio producer, a horticulturist, a group-store manageress and a number of secondary school teachers, police officers and professionally qualified nurses and midwives. The women tended to be of high social-class background, their fathers typically being senior civil servants or in other professional occupations. In a few cases, however, women were of more humble rural backgrounds and, by virtue of family sacrifice—more often sacrifice on the part of their mothers—and their own perseverance and ambition, had worked their way into their present elite occupational positions.

The women ranged in age from 25 to 39 years with the majority being in their late twenties and early thirties. The family backgrounds of

2. These 87 women represented 30% of the total population of women in the area between the ages of 21-45.

3. J. C. Caldwell (1968: 35) records that 83% of the females in his survey of urban elites had married before they were 25 years of age. His exact breakdown for age at first marriage is as follows:

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<th>Age</th>
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<td>30 and over</td>
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the women tended to be Christian and monogamous although, in a number of instances, fathers did have other common-law wives by whom they had also had children. All the women claimed to belong to one or other of the major Christian churches—Methodist, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic or Anglican.

Only four of the women had actually been born in Accra. The remainder came from the various regions in Ghana, being born more typically in other provincial capitals. Almost all the women belonged to the major southern Ghanaian ethnic group—the matrilineal Akan—; they were predominantly of Fante or Akuapim origin, ethnic groups historically noted for their high evaluation of education and having a tradition of Western literacy within families going back several generations.

The majority of the women had been educated in private boarding schools in Ghana—more typically the prestigious long-established denominational institutions along the coast—and had then proceeded either to the University of Ghana or overseas, for their professional training. On completion of these courses, the women went straight into their chosen professional occupations; they were often, at that point, in their mid-twenties. The majority of the women are presently working in the public sector, being employed as medical officers, nurses, teachers, etc., by the Ghanaian Health and Educational Boards or as company lawyers, executive officers, etc., in public corporations. The two women running their own educational institutions were the only persons to be self-employed. By Ghanaian standards, all the women were earning high incomes.

Thirteen of the women had never married whilst four had married and divorced.

Reluctance to Marry

None of the women being discussed were, in their own terms, ‘married’. In Ghana there are presently three different marriage forms: marriage under the various systems of customary law which are all potentially polygamous; marriage according to Islamic law which is also polygamous; and marriage under the ordinance which can be either by religious rites in Church or by civil rites before a registrar. This latter is the form most closely related to the conjugal Western form of marriage in that a man can lawfully marry only one wife, certain property rights are guaranteed to the wife, and the marriage can only be terminated by legal divorce in the courts (Tetteh 1967: 205-209). This last type of marriage was the form preferred by these professional women.

One of the reasons offered by the women for their reluctance to marry was their desire to consolidate their careers after graduation by building up their own professional practices, reputations and institutes. They were unwilling to combine both domestic and professional responsibilities
which, they felt, could have hindered their occupational ascent. But although marriage at an earlier age would have involved some brake on their careers, the main factor, emerging from discussions with the women, which had discouraged them from marrying was the discrepancy between their own ideals of marriage and the realities of the institution as they perceived it in Ghana.

One area of obvious discrepancy between their own expectations and those of Ghanaian men was that of 'romantic love'. The women appeared to lay a heavy emphasis on the emotional side of a marital relationship. They stressed the importance of a companionate, exclusive and individualised conjugal relationship and were highly articulate about the men's inability to meet these aspirations. They felt, in the first instance, that the main factor influencing men in their choice of marriage partners was the economic viability of the women. Another important reason offered was the men's general desire to find housemaids and that they were more likely to be preoccupied with the procreative aspect of marriage than with maintaining any romantic emotional relationship with their wives.

Neither did they expect as wives to enjoy an egalitarian relationship with their husbands. They noted that a considerable degree of social distance still characterised relations even between educated partners and complained that the Ghanaian male's conception of the role of husband, even in monogamous unions, still bore a close resemblance to that prevailing amongst traditional husbands - an expectation that they would be the dominant partners in the relationship and entitled to respect and obedience from their wives. Many of the women were reluctant to accept this subordination to husbands.

Neither did they expect that marriage would involve any cooperation from their husbands in domestic chores. From their knowledge of marriages amongst their educated peers in full-time occupations, they could see no joint participation in child-care, domestic routines or cooking; all domestic responsibilities devolved on the woman despite the fact that she was also holding down a full-time occupation.

Another complaint mentioned repeatedly was the Ghanaian husband's inability to adopt a behavioural pattern of fidelity. They know it is unrealistic to hope for a faithful husband and anticipate that their husbands will have mistresses outside. A clear-cut pattern has emerged in the city whereby men, having opted for monogamous unions, tend to pursue more informal forms of polygamy outside their formal marriages.

4. Other writers have commented on the adoption of this ideal of romantic love as the basis for conjugal marriage. G. JAHODA (1959: 188), in his analysis of letters to the advice column of a Ghanaian newspaper, notes 'the taking over of the notion of romantic love, and of marriage as a partnership of like-minded individuals'. T. P. OMARI (1960: 207), in his research amongst teacher training college and secondary school leavers, also comments on this trend and notes that 'women have a more radical bent against the traditional family institution than the men' - 94% of the females as compared with 86% of the males in his sample noted that love would be the most important factor when they married.
in an institutionalised system of ‘girlfriend’ relationships. The masculine role in Ghana involves a strong element of machismo or male virility which is articulated through a man’s ability to attract and maintain girlfriends. But the man can only retain the services of such girls by considerable financial outlays—resources which the women as wives feel should more properly be directed to the family budget. They are highly critical and resentful of such behaviour, especially as it involves a double standard with absolute fidelity required of wives. These women are reluctant to occupy the sexually inferior position to outside girlfriends which they are convinced is the role of wife in present-day Ghana.

They are also critical of the segregation of social roles of husbands and wives with the men spending most of their free time, when not occupied with their girlfriends, with other male friends. They are well aware of this reluctance on the part of husbands to mix socially with their wives; and they know that prevailing peer-group norms make it socially obligatory for men to move with, in all but the most formal social circles, girlfriends, rather than with their wives. They feel, therefore, that it is unlikely that they will share a place beside their husbands in society. At the same time, they know that their own autonomous social life will be rigidly curtailed with men still anxious to confine them as wives to the home to get on with the wifely tasks of housework, child-minding and food preparation whilst they pursue their own social and recreational life with their own friends. They articulated strongly and frequently the apprehension that on marriage their days of ‘seeing life’ would be over.

The women also appear to perceive few economic improvements for themselves in marriage. From the perceived treatment of wives around them, they are not so confident that their own economic status or standard of living will necessarily be improved. It appears to them that the man’s financial input into the marriage will depend on how much of his resources can be diverted not only from his girlfriends and his own autonomous social life but also from his own extended family. The women anticipate that even in marriage their husbands will remain strongly obligated to their own lineage group and that such obligations will remain more important than the marital ones—disloyalty to the lineage being a far greater sin in the eyes of the men than conjugal disloyalty. The women, therefore, anticipate being in competition with their husband’s lineage for the man’s resources— their husbands being faced with the conflicting responsibilities of husbands and fathers, in their conjugal homes, as well as shouldering responsibilities as brothers and uncles in their own fam-

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5. The same fear and resentment with regard to other women benefitting from their husbands’ resources was voiced by the married women in C. Oppong’s (1974: 91, 95-96) study of the Accra elite.

6. Caldwell (1968: 61-63) found in his survey of elites, that 32% of his female respondents claimed that they never or rarely had joint outings with their husbands. Of those who did, one third specified that these joint outings were formal affairs such as Church or funeral attendance.
lies. Such competing forces, the women feel, will undercut any hopes they might have of conjugal solidarity or joint investment in their children’s future.

They anticipate no joint pooling of resources or joint property ownership and realise that considerable responsibilities for the maintenance of the children and their clothing will fall to them as wives.

Recent reforms entitle a woman to maintenance for her children and some share as a widow in the self-acquired property of their husbands. Yet the problem, as the women see it, is one of translating these statutory reforms into reality, in view of the ingrained reluctance on the part of women to initiate action against their children’s father or his family. There is, in addition, a widely held scepticism that such action, in any event, is likely to lead to any positive results for themselves or their children given the male-dominated legal system.

So, over all, marriage does not present itself as a particularly attractive proposition for these women and their attitudes reveal a uniform bias against it. This disillusionment with marriage has produced, not unexpectedly, a climate of opinion amongst these women that has made them reluctant to marry. But, although they are basically sceptical of the possibility of forging meaningful or lasting marital ties (which would be their own ideal of a marital arrangement), the women rarely ruled out marriage at some future date. They realise that their status as ‘single’ women has not crystallised into an acceptable position in Ghanaian society; that whilst their society still lays stress on marriage and the bearing of children as the approved roles for women, there is little option open to them on that score. Their own education and orientation may have introduced some doubts in their own minds that this is necessarily so, but they don’t consider any other life pattern as possible in Ghana at the moment.

For respect in their society, therefore, they are prepared to accommodate traditional demands and take on the roles of wives and mothers, or, as they phrase it themselves, ‘go in and try’. In fact, none of the women, except those who had been married in the past, accepted their present status as ‘single’ women as being other than temporary. What

7. This would appear to be a highly accurate reading of the situation. Oppong (1972: 215) found amongst her population of married elites that financial responsibility for kin was almost universal. Such assistance took the form of ‘help, either with maintenance, education, or trading and building projects or medical and other expenses’ in addition to monthly remittances, occasional gifts, money to cover funeral expenses and ‘the rearing and education of relatives’ children’.

8. Oppong (1974: 85-94) notes the marked economic autonomy of husbands and wives. She found that less than one in ten couples had joint savings accounts; only a few jointly owned property and that the usual practice was for wives to assume full responsibility for their own and their children’s clothing and partial responsibility for the provision of the household food and the payment of domestic servants.

9. This problem has been discussed by a number of prominent Ghanaian legal practitioners (cf. K. Bentsi-Enchill 1975; Appeals Court Judge Annie Jiagge 1974).
they do feel, however, is that some choice remains open to them as to the timing of marriage. For the moment their strategy is to postpone it for as long as possible and to devote their energies to their own occupational careers and to the build-up of their own financial resources.

*Drive for Economic Self-Sufficiency*

Such career ambitions, in fact, are also realistically connected with both their own matrimonial prospects and their getting a better deal once married. We noted already how the women themselves were convinced that men were more likely to put the earning power of women above any other considerations when it came to choosing wives. Also, there is considerable evidence to suggest that wives are more likely to enjoy something approximating an egalitarian relationship with their husbands if their resources are going into the family budget (Oppong 1974; Little 1975a).

Neither do any of the women envisage stopping work after marriage. None of them could ever foresee the day that they would allow themselves—even if their husbands desired nonworking wives—to be completely dependent on them financially. The desire by these women to continue with their careers after marriage placed them in a better position to handle unsuccessful marriages; being economically self-sufficient themselves they draw additional confidence from knowing that if their marriage became unbearable at any point, they could dissolve it and still be in a position to maintain themselves and their children.

So, for the meanwhile, the women feel that their future status as wives and the long-term security of themselves and their children are best served by postponing marriage and concentrating on the build-up of their own careers and economic resources. Getting ahead is a matter of vital concern for the women and a predominant characteristic of them all was a high achievement motivation and an orientation of their lives around their work. All channels for their own advancement were being explored. A number entertained further educational aspirations, often involving going overseas for further professional training; others intended leaving their present places of employment to set up their own private clinics or legal chambers; yet others were hopeful of further promotion within the organizations in which they were employed—quite realistically in view of their rapid mobility in the past. Those already self-employed had carefully-laid plans for the modernization and expansion of their educational institutions—the provision of more modern equipment, the
introduction of more advanced courses, increasing their student numbers, employing more teachers, etc.

One would expect that for such dedicated, ambitious and vocationally qualified women the advancement of their own career interests and the maintenance of their independence of men would present few problems. But career advancement in Ghana is not only dependent on one's vocational endeavours. A striking feature of Ghanaian society is that the organization of economic and political relations is different from that of Western capitalist societies. Rationality and bureaucracy are not characteristics of most Ghanaian State organizations. Despite many attempts at reform made by successive Ghanaian governments since independence to curb or eliminate graft, nepotism and patronage (Le Vine 1975: 48), there is cynical resignation amongst the women that people will make use of the resources of their office as they themselves see fit and, that the average Ghanaian bureaucrat is influenced more by kin, friendship or sexual considerations than by any established rules and procedures operating in any particular instance. The main resources of such offices are jobs, loans, contracts, scholarships and a wide variety of other lesser, mainly bureaucratic, favours. All these resources are of vital concern to the women under discussion.

But, in many instances of favouritism, neither graft nor the exchange of money is involved; such favours, loans, and deserts are granted on the basis of friendship. Individuals appear to experience conflicting norms between their roles as members of such organizations and their own familial or friendship obligations; favours are very often granted where traditional expectations with regard to obligation and service are found. Thus, many functionaries would feel obliged to facilitate members of their own families, and, by extension in modern Ghana, a wide variety of friends and acquaintances who are absorbed into their social networks virtually as fictive kin.

The professional women of the present sample are experts at manipulating these current values and behavioural norms and have managed to cultivate friendships with many highly influential individuals and to gain access to their networks. And, since men still monopolise practically all the positions of power and influence in the country and control the resources that the women want, these friendships invariably involve influential men. Military commissioners, former politicians, top civil servants, bank managers, housing officials and a wide variety of other male personnel scattered strategically throughout the various bureaucracies in Accra were mentioned by the women as being friends. The socialising involved in making and retaining these links is highly demanding of their time and energy but the efforts involved in keeping such a large set of acquaintances were amply rewarded at a number of crucial points in their career histories. Some women were dependent on such connections in obtaining their employment in the first instance; one woman had managed to avoid an unwelcome transfer to the rural area.
which would have done nothing to promote her career; another woman was awarded a scholarship for a three-year course overseas although technically she did not qualify; personal acquaintance with the bank manager was essential in the case of another woman who was in need of a bank loan to expand her educational institution. Other examples are numerous and did not always involve matters of direct occupational interest—e.g., jumping waiting lists in the allocation of housing.

On a more regular basis, women have to have recourse to such contacts to obtain the preferential treatment necessary to overcome the time-consuming process of enforcing even their legal rights. In order to bypass the normal ‘go/come’ delaying tactics of most of the functionaries in public institutions, the women had to rely on their contacts. Some women had their telephones installed through contact with somebody in the post office; others had managed to circumvent the red tape involved in securing import licences and expedited custom clearance for their imported cars by getting their own contacts within the organization to handle the matter for them; passports, foreign exchange, visas, etc., were all obtained in the same way.

So, partly by their own occupational skills and endeavours and partly by the skilful manipulation of their social roles and networks, women in this professional category in the city are achieving a considerable level of financial and social independence.

_**Life-Styles of the Women**_

The women enjoy a high standard of living by any criterion. In a few instances accommodation was provided by employers; others had bought or built their own houses whilst others had rented modern self-contained flats. Most of these homes were modern, Western-style bungalows often set in their own grounds. Houses were decorated in modern styles and well furnished; this was largely by their own efforts, though in one or two instances furnishings were also provided by their employers. A wide and expensive array of modern consumer goods and household luxuries characterised these homes: deep freezers, refrigerators, electrical cooling fans and a wide variety of modern electrical kitchen equipment. Other acquisitions included televisions, radiograms, drinks cabinets and sundry European or African ornamental items. Many of the women drive their own Fiat or Toyota cars. They are invariably well-groomed and expensively and fashionably dressed in Ghanaian or European clothes. Occasionally younger relatives were living with the women and assisted in the maintenance of the home, in other instances, the women employed maids. The upkeep of these establishments—the day-to-day budgeting, recurring expenditure, etc.—is being maintained by the women’s own economic efforts.

Most of the women had regular boyfriends. They tended to be high-
status, highly qualified professional men - accountants, lawyers, officials with international organizations, etc. Most were fellow-Ghanaians but some were from other African countries or of non-African origin. The women had a wide knowledge of modern contraceptive methods which enabled them lead sexually-active lives without fear of procreation.

**Investment for Future Security**

The women are also using this period before marriage to invest some of their surplus income. Some already owned houses; others had bought plots of land in the suburbs of Accra and either planned or were in process of building. They were renting or planning to rent such property. They are also steadily accumulating their own domestic furniture and household luxuries.

The women also invest a considerable part of their earnings in their own extended families. They are still firmly located in the network of their kin and bonds of affection, obligation, cooperation, exchange and loyalty developed over a lifetime showed little sign of disappearing. The kin in question tend to be only a segment of their lineage. Ties between women appear to be especially strong with the main emphasis on direct lineal or lateral female relatives. Members of this network are more typically geographically dispersed throughout Ghana but active and enduring contact with a nucleus of their extended family members has been maintained since the women arrived in Accra.

None of the women were without some kin in Accra, many of them claiming that the city was ‘full of their relatives’. When parents, and especially mothers, were living in Accra, visiting could take place on an almost daily basis. Bonds with sisters also appeared to be particularly close and scarcely a week-end passed without a visit and some form of exchange or cooperation. Although these were the kin most frequently visited they did keep in touch with a much wider range—aunts (MZ), uncles (MB), cousins (MZD), etc. who would probably be visited or would themselves call on the women at least fortnightly.

Kin outside Accra were also visited frequently. The mother-daughter ties was by far the most important and the women visited their mother on a regular basis often monthly, but this seemed to depend on how far away from Accra they were staying. Bonds and visiting patterns with other female kin were also important, sisters, aunts (MZ), cousins (MZD) and grandmothers (MM) being visited regularly. They are also in constant touch with their dispersed families by telephone, and Christmas and Easter holidays and some portion of their annual holidays were usually spent back in their mothers’ home towns. Annual festivals in their areas of origin are usually occasions for a prolonged visit and provide opportunities for the women to meet all the dispersed family members. Movement is in the other direction as well. The women are frequently
hosts to visiting members of their families from outside Accra: mothers often come to stay for a couple of weeks or younger siblings or nieces (ZD) and nephews (ZS) to spend their school holidays.

Heavy financial responsibilities are also being undertaken by the majority of the women in looking after their kin. Mothers were the most frequent recipients of regular remittances, in some instances receiving as much as one-fifth of the women's monthly incomes. The more typical pattern, however, was a smaller token amount. Other recipients were likely to be kin who had at some stage in their lives taken care of the women and the women felt some element of obligation was involved.

And, it is not only money that is given. Regular gifts of clothing, footwear and provisions are regularly sent to kin in rural areas. On their annual visits for festivals, the women amass a considerable quantity of such items to distribute to a wide range of family members.

Even when the remittances are not regular because other members of their families are wealthy or in receipt of regular incomes themselves, the women had often voluntarily contributed substantial sums for specific items. Thus, one woman helped her father to purchase a new car; another had provided a large share of the building materials for her mother who was 'putting up a building' in her home town; another had insisted on paying the considerable medical expenses involved in a prolonged illness of a younger sibling, and so on.

They also contribute in a more directly instrumental way to building up the economic strength of their kinship group. Gifts of trading capital and assistance in the education of kin members are the more typical ways of doing this. A number of the women had made lump-sum gifts of money—often substantial—to their mothers or aunts (FZ, MZ), to start or expand their trading ventures. This often enabled such members to be economically independent themselves and relieved the women of their own previous on-going obligations for regular remitting.

Practically all the women had younger relatives (Z, B, ZS, ZD, MZD, MZS) staying with them for whom they were solely responsible. They maintained them; they also paid their school fees—often considerable when attending boarding schools; they bought their school uniforms and provided them with pocket money and transport costs.

Even on marriage, the women envisage a continuation of these kinship ties and were adamant that their present responsibilities would continue. Undoubtedly the women enjoy their kinship roles as sisters, daughters and nieces at the family rituals surrounding births, marriages and deaths of their family members. Also, it is important that they establish and maintain independent ties of affiliation, affection, obligation and loyalty given their scepticism of being able to forge strong affective or cooperative conjugal ties. There is also sound economic sense in ensuring the upkeep of good relations with this group; women in matrilineal systems continue to have vested interests in lineage property. Also, their present pattern of regular investment in kin members will
enable them, in future, to play a dominant role in relation to the kin members they have helped; such kin, they are confident, will shoulder any necessary responsibilities for themselves and their children, in the future, should the need arise. In a general way, therefore, the retention of these ties with kin can be viewed as a highly rational adaptation by the women to the constraints in their social environment.

**Evaluation of Status**

How do these observations bear on the question posed at the beginning of this paper? Has the process of urbanization improved or worsened the position of this important, albeit privileged, category of urban women?

1. One obvious focus of interest for these women is their careers. Apart from the intrinsic satisfaction that the women obtain from their professional work, they enjoy steady employment and high, secure incomes; they also control the allocation of their own economic resources. Thus the city affords these women much broadened options than did a rural economy. It offers them a real opportunity to be financially autonomous of husbands and kin; it enables them to retain their single status; to maintain themselves if inadequately provided for in marriage; and, to break away from an unsatisfactory union if they so determine.

2. Another area where the city seems to offer the women increased options is on the question of marriage and motherhood. In traditional Ghanaian society, motherhood and marriage were the prescribed roles for women; they also had little choice to decide whom their husbands would be. In the surveyed area of Accra, however, as many as 30% of the women were not complying with this norm. This was not, as the 'Pessimists' would claim because urban women cannot get husbands, but because they actively choose to remain single. For all these women, marriage offers were at some point considered but turned down—the ideal partner did not present himself, or, their own carefully-laid career plans precluded marriage at that point in their lives.

Neither does the single state preclude boyfriends or a sexual life. Modern methods of contraception available in the city enable them to lead sexually active lives without fears of motherhood.

When these women eventually decide to marry, the marriage will be based on their free consent; they will insist on legal, statutory marriage which is monogamous and will give them maintenance rights for their children; as widows they will be entitled to share in the inheritance of their husbands' property. Their strong economic position also gives them a greater chance of commanding an egalitarian relationship with their husbands. They will also enjoy considerable choice in the area of reproduction: they will be able to decide on the number and spacing of their children. And, finally, if the marriage proves unsatisfactory, they can initiate proceedings for a divorce.
3. A third major area of broadened options for the women concerns their relationships with kin. Whilst geographically separated from most members of their extended families, they are able to avoid close scrutiny of their activities and to enjoy more day-to-day freedom. Their own economic strength, on the other hand, enables them to select a power-base in whatever limited but strategic segment of their lineage that they choose.

4. A last major area of increased freedom lies in the life-styles they choose to adopt. Living in a city involves a considerable increase in their freedom of movement and a greatly expanded social world. Traditionally, social life was rigidly dichotomized by sex but this rigid segregation of the sexes breaks down in the city and women are involved in joint recreational activities with men; they enjoy the same social round as their men friends, accompanying them to hotels, parties, and beer bars. This has brought about radical changes in the relations between the sexes, the traditional distance which characterised relations between women and non-kin males being no longer appropriate. As ‘single’ women they are treated as social equals.

The range of associational options available to them has also increased. They can still belong to exclusively female associations like their own professional women’s groups but they can also join unsegregated clubs, lodges. There is too a wider range of benevolent, religious and educational organizations open to them than was available in traditional society.

So, overall, it is argued that urban living represents a real improvement in the life-styles, freedom and options available to these women; it is put forward particularly that such choices did not exist in traditional Ghanaian society and are only available in an urban environment.

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These professional Accra women, therefore, rather than being passive, submissive creatures subjugated by men, have developed a highly self-interested orientation and a considerable measure of independence from them. They are reluctant to marry them, preferring to concentrate on their own economic and social advancement. At the same time, they orient their lives in the direction of their own kinship groups, in which they anticipate most emotional satisfaction, support, and personal security.

The prevailing ideologies and social structures in Ghana may actually facilitate a positive approach by women in relation to their economic role. A strong ideology exists that stresses the economic role of women. The structural supports of equality of economic opportunity, equal status in law, maternity leave, etc., also facilitate long-term career ambitions for women.

Such factors undoubtedly influence the women’s own self-image. They have a real sense of themselves as being the decisive agents in the
shaping of their own social and economic environment. They are highly active, resilient strategists choosing their own ways of promoting their own interests based on their own rational assessment of their own social, economic and political resources. They are satisfied with the existing channels for economic self-realization and are confident that they can be financially self-sufficient and, to this extent, have better control of their own destinies.

The women, however, could in no way be considered feminist. Although they are aware of the sexual inequalities of their society, there is no evidence to support any theory of a developing feminism amongst them. On the contrary, they accept that in many spheres they are subordinate to men. They choose rather to acknowledge this male superordination but to manipulate it in their own interests. In this sense, they can more properly be considered as pragmatists than feminists. They take as given the fact that men monopolize culturally legitimated authority and power; but they concentrate their energies on finding self-fulfilling solutions within existing structures.

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C. DINAN Pragmatistes ou féministes? Femmes célibataires cadres à Accra. L’effet de l’urbanisation sur le statut des femmes africaines divise les observateurs entre « optimistes » et « pessimistes », leurs conclusions paraissant souvent impressionnistes et entachées d’ethnocentrisme. L’auteur a donc préféré aborder le sujet dans la perspective de la stratégie des rôles et intentions. Elle étudie dix-sept cas de femmes akan, célibataires ou divorcées, occupant des emplois supérieurs ou exerçant des professions libérales. Dans un système de valeurs qui continue à privilégier le mariage et la maternité, le célibat reste un choix temporaire qui permet à ces femmes de renforcer leur position dans leur lignage, surtout du côté de la parentèle féminine. Tout compte fait, la modernisation paraît avoir, pour ce groupe restreint, un effet objectivement bénéfique.