Gedeelde smart is halve smart : hoe vrouwen in Paramaribo hun bestaan organiseren
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Summary

Suriname is a relatively unknown country in Latin America and the Caribbean region. It is situated on the northeast coast of the South American continent and nestled between French Guyana to the East, Guyana to the West and Brazil to the South. Both French Guyana and Guyana are accessible by boat along the coast. Approximately 435,000 people live in Suriname, making it the sixth most populous country in the Caricom, a group of Caribbean countries (particularly those where English is the official language). Suriname has been a member of Caricom since 1995.

Suriname is dominated by “the city”, that is, its capital Paramaribo. Metropolitan Paramaribo (i.e. the districts of Paramaribo and Wanica) has about 290,000 inhabitants, representing over two-thirds of the country’s population. The second largest settlement, situated along the eastern bank of the Corantijn river at Suriname’s western border, is Nieuw Nickerie with approximately 15,000 inhabitants.

Since the settlement of the region by Europeans in the seventeenth century, the population has been concentrated in the coastal region. This is also where the most important economic and political activities take place. Trade and services is concentrated in Paramaribo, containing the headquarters of companies producing elsewhere in the country (such as bauxite companies). The government is also located in Paramaribo. The coastal region comprises approximately 16% of the total surface area of Suriname, and is 15 km broad on the east side and 80 km on the west.

In addition to the coastline, two other natural areas are worth mentioning: a rather hilly tropical rain forest (making up approximately 80% of the total land mass, and usually referred to as the interior), and a savanna belt. Only natives and Maroons (descendants of runaway slaves) live in the interior. In total, only 3% of Suriname is inhabited, making the population density quite low: about 2.5 people per square kilometer.

Despite the geographical link to South America, Suriname has more historical and social similarities with the Caribbean area. Like other Caribbean countries, Suriname has a multi-ethnic composition, originating during its plantation colony period. Currently, the main ethnic groups in Suriname are Creoles (descedents of black African slaves which have mixed with other ethnic groups over several years), the Hindustani and the Javanese (descendants of contracted laborers from British India and Java). These groups comprise 32%, 35% and 15% of the population respectively. Other ethnic groups (together 17% of the total) include Maroons, Native Indians, Chinese, Lebanese, Boeroes.

1 This was 69% in 1988, ABS (May 1999).
(descendants of Dutch farmers which had established themselves in 1845)\(^2\) and those who are clearly of "mixed" origin. The ethnic diversity has led to political segmentation; Suriname's political parties have a strong ethnic orientation. The ethnic segmentation is also evident in various sectors of the economy. Creoles have a clear majority in the central government and public enterprises - the so-called parastatal companies. For Creoles, the government is by far the largest non-agricultural source of sustenance (see also Dew, 1996). The commercial sector is dominated by Hindustani and, to a lesser degree, Chinese and Lebanese people. Attempts to privatize and/or reduce personnel in state enterprises has led to tension between the two largest ethnic groups.

In terms of language Suriname has few similarities with other Caribbean countries where other European languages are the official language. Besides Suriname, Dutch is only spoken in Aruba and the Dutch Antilles. Suriname is also the only Dutch-speaking country in Caricom. The move to join Caricom was mainly intended to help reduce the country's social and economic isolation.

Since its independence in 1975, the republic of Suriname has been a parliamentary democracy. The fifty-one members of parliament - De Nationale Assemblee (DNA) - are directly elected by the people. The years following 1980 in Suriname are marked by political turmoil. Important events in this period include the 1980 military coup, a new cabinet appointed by the military in 1982, the assassination of a number of prominent citizens in the same year and the war of the interior in the 1986-1988 period.

Under increasing national and international pressure, a general election was held in 1987. The party "Front for Democracy and Development" won the election with 41 of the 51 seats. The Front was an anti-military coalition composed of the then largest (and ethnically oriented) parties, namely the Creole-dominated Nationale Partij of Suriname (NPS), the Hindustani-dominated Progressive Hindustani Party (VHP) and the Tulodo Pranatan Inggil (KTP), which had a Javanese majority. Another military coup was attempted in 1990, and the presiding president was ousted shortly thereafter. General elections were once again held in May 1991, after which the former government - with the addition of the Surinamese Labor Party - returned under the name "Nieuw Front." The new government stated as a goal to revive the badly neglected connection with The Netherlands, and to limit the power of the military (which they blamed for the sharp decrease in development aid). It was in this time that the programs for structural reforms were implemented, which, at least for the short term, exacerbated the socio-economic crisis for most of the population. Nevertheless, the government did manage to stabilize the currency by 1996, enabling a first step towards recovery. However, the political situation changed after the 1996 elections. The NDP assumed power in a coalition with some other political parties. However, the lack of cohesion between the parties in this coalition and the apparent dearth of stimulating and facilitating policy resulted in increasing the social and economic instability of the country. Too much time was devoted to maintaining the fragile coalition of divergent interests, which came at the cost of political will, growth and development. In this sense, Suriname's political and economic prospects appeared rather bleak during the study period. On May 25, 2000 the New Front won the elections again, signaling the reinstatement of Venetiaan as president.

Suriname has a number of natural resources, and is largely dependent on the export of these. In 1997, this included alumina and aluminum (77%), rice and bananas (10%), shrimp and fish (8%) and crude oil and timber (5%). However important these exports may be to the Surinamese economy, they have failed to bring about stable growth and development.

Structural reforms put an end to the “privileged” era of plentiful government subsidies. Measures taken in this period included placing a halt on all “unnecessary” imports and cutbacks in the service sector. Foreign currency had already been subjected to strict controls. The restrictions placed on imports created problems for segments of the business sector that were dependent on “state protection.” Due to their dependency on raw materials and capital goods from abroad, these parties could no longer guarantee their level of production, and many were forced out of business.

**Women and structural adjustment**

In the short-term at least, the structural adjustments negatively impacted the daily livelihood of those households in which women played an essential part. Surinamese women’s organizations which had read about the negative effects SAPs had had on women elsewhere in the world urged the government to “take into account the interests of women when drawing up structural adjustment programs.” A 1994 document entitled “Country Programme to Address the Impact of Structural Adjustment on Women in Suriname” expressed an attempt to again address this concern, namely the absence of a plan that adequately took the impact of the SAP on women into account. This concern proved to be justified as the results of an IDB study found that women would disproportionately bear the burden of the reforms. Specifically, the report made the following argument:

...More women are forced to seek employment in the informal sector either as their means of income or to subsidise their wages. Further the fall out from the structural adjustment programme such as contraction in the public sector will significantly affect women who are mainly employed in the middle and lower levels of the public service structure, and which are most vulnerable in times of retrenchment. In addition the recurrent shortages in food items, the additional time spent in obtaining food all add to women’s already heavy burdens. These changes contribute to stress within the household and are related to breakdowns in family relationships. As a result there is an increase in the number of street children as well as increases in the incidence of domestic violence in which women and children are the main victims. (Country Report to Address the Impact of Structural Adjustment on Women in Suriname, 1994).

Particularly the effects of government cutbacks on education, health care and the effect of inflation on the price of sustenance goods would be felt by these women. This issue prompted various NGOs - often backed by foreign funds - to take action to increase the economic security of women in the lowest income groups in both Greater Paramaribo and the Interior. In order to coordinate these initiatives, which have continued to the present day, the national association NGO-Forum was established in 1994 and contains over 170 members. In addition, the National Bureau on Gender Policy (NBG) set up under the Ministry of Domestic Affairs on January 14, 1998 to monitor women’s policy, received the important task of ensuring that the gender aspect would become an integral part of all governmental decisions. In contrast to the NGOs which concentrate primarily on enhancing the economic position of women, the NBG applies the concept of “gender and
development" to areas where gender inequality occurs. The NBO has supported projects such as "Violence Against Women IS our Problem" which noted an inversely proportional relationship between economic growth and domestic violence in the country: as the economic situation worsens, domestic violence rises.

The research areas

The present research selected the urban districts Munderbuiten (West Paramaribo), Frimangron (Center) and Abbraboki (South Paramaribo) on the basis of their ethnic mixture and poverty rate. Frimangron and Abbraboki are typical working-class districts, which have acquired a mixed ethnic character over time. Munderbuiten, a less poor area, once having a lower middle class character. Fieldwork data was collected in the years between 1994 and 1999.

A number of facilities are present in the neighborhoods such as elementary and secondary schools, churches, mosques and temples. However, hardly any neighborhood centers and/or recreation facilities are present. Economic activities are overshadowed by the inner city, and are primarily geared towards the food service industry. However, makeshift shops, auto repair and taxi companies are also present. Many economic activities are informal in nature, and have an ethnic or gender aspect.

Research questions and findings

The research for this dissertation on women, poverty and livelihood in Paramaribo sought to answer the following three questions.

1. What kinds of livelihood strategies are employed by women and their households, and what dynamics can be distinguished in this regard? This question is divided into the acquisition of income and the production, expenditure and management of the household income.
2. What characterizes the decision-making process between women and their male partners, and how do the resources women have at their disposal influence this?
3. What division of labor can be distinguished between women and their male partners and what changes are observable over time?

These three research questions were investigated against the backdrop of the long-lasting economic crisis, one that has plagued Suriname since the early 1980s. Since this time, the incomes of many Surinamese households have declined dramatically. A 1997 World Bank report estimated that 47% of the Surinamese population lived under the poverty level, making Suriname, after Haiti, the poorest country in the Caribbean. The situation has probably worsened since, as World Bank figures from 2000 show that Suriname has continued to hold a weak position in the Caribbean.

The basic premise of this research is that the social crisis has not only affected the livelihood of households as such, but especially the role of women within these households. The turbulent economic developments have intensified the responsibilities women are expected to perform. Not
only is their position within the household determined by the traditional reproductive contribution to the household (i.e. nurturing, clothing, and raising children) but increasingly also a productive contribution.

Research by Surinamese scholars in the 1960s - when Suriname was still politically dependent on The Netherlands - generally concentrated on households and families within the various different ethnic groups. Although interesting insights were gained into the workings of the households in this period, the division into separate ethnic categories served to emphasize differences between groups. Because the concept of gender only gained widespread international attention in the 1980s, before this date similarities between the internal socio-economic position of women were inadequately addressed. Nevertheless, this research tradition has powerfully determined the nature of scholarly discussions on the Surinamese household, as witnessed by the few studies on the structure and working of households, which have been carried out since. The necessity for gaining more insight into gender relations within the household is now recognized by women’s organizations throughout Surinamese society.

In light of the above, it was important to take both household type and ethnicity into account in this analysis of the role of women in securing the livelihood of poor households. To do this, three household types were identified: female headed households, female managed households, and male headed households. Female headed households are characterized by the absence of a male partner and comprise 35% of the total sample. For this household type - most common among Creoles - the female head is single, divorced (and/or abandoned), widowed and relatively old; it is also often characterized by the presence of extended family members.

Traditionally seen, extended families had an ethnic-specific dimension. Researchers assumed that this mainly occurred among Hindustani and predominantly paternalistic (male headed) households (e.g. Speckman, 1965). However, the results of this study do not support this view. Instead, extended families were found primarily among the female headed households (Creoles), followed by female managed households (Javanese) and finally male headed households (mainly Javanese and Hindustani).

The male headed households - most common among Hindustanis and Javanese - were the largest category of household type in the sample (56%). These were made up of a woman and a residing male partner, either in the form of marriage or cohabitation. The female managed households - most common among Javanese - were the smallest group in the sample (9%), and consisted of a woman and her cohabitating male partner (either as a spouse or not); women made the largest economic contribution to these households. This contribution was made possible by the higher incomes that their occupations and networks produced. Moreover, female managed households - which also had the highest average of employed people - were also found to have the highest incomes of all the household types.

The relatively new concept of female managed households is a useful supplement to the dichotomy between female-headed and male headed households. This confronts the stigmatized imagery of gender relations in the household, namely, that all households containing a male partner are by definition male-headed. Various authors (e.g. Chant 1997a; Handa, 1994 and 1996), which have performed research in Latin America and the Caribbean have acknowledged and criticized
this misconception. Increasingly more voices are heard in academic and policy circles that argue for identifying heads of households using economic criteria. These authors maintain that too much evidence exists to deny that women play an important role in the survival of the household even when a man is present. This new approach allows one to better identify, which tasks within the household are, in reality, being fulfilled by women. This view is supported by Chant (1997a: 9), who states that such an approach “better reflect[s] women’s critical and under-acknowledged responsibilities in household life.” Similarly, Handa (1994:1) states that, “There is evidence from Latin America and West Africa that a significant number of reported male headed households (MHHs) are actually maintained by women.” This discussion on the significance of women in the fight against poverty at the household level seems to justify the use of the female managed household type. Despite the presence of a residing male partner, it is the women in this household type, which make the most important economic contribution.

In terms of ethnicity, the analysis involved a selection of Creole, Hindustani, and Javanese households in three ethnically mixed neighborhoods. These ethnic groups represent the largest three in the city. The research posited that a comparative study of households spanning different ethnic groups would produce important information about the differences and/or similarities about the relative power of women in the context of household survival strategies. Although a relationship clearly exists between household type and ethnicity, the two do not always overlap.

In addition to ethnicity and household type, factors such as the life-phase of the family, (in)tolerance of the partner regarding the paid employment of women outside the home also significantly influence the role women play in providing for the household. Often a combination of these factors determines which possibilities exist, and the extent to which these can be taken advantage of.

The main theme of the research project is how the livelihood strategies of women in poor households is structured and how this leads to a specific division of labor. Livelihood strategies - defined in this study as the provision of basic necessities for an individual or household - are important for both women as well as men. The difference between the two, however, is that the latter, regardless of ethnic background or household type, are primarily concerned with earning an income because of the consequences this has for their manhood and/or their power position within the household. This is observable in the large number of men who have an income through paid employment and who use this (or at least for a significant part of this) to contribute to the household. This has important implications for the position of men and women in the household. It also translates itself, in part, in an ethno-cultural intolerance regarding the possibility of women earning income outside the home. This is especially true for Hindustani women, who are delegated a position of dependency within the household.

Nevertheless, the fact that men generally have more income than women does not usually lead to a greater say in decision-making over the reproductive tasks within the household. This research found that social responsibilities remain the domain of women, regardless of how progressive women and men appear to be on this issue. This is primarily due to the patterns of expectation held by men and women, relative to the ethnic background, and the amount of work done by women outside the home. This is particularly the case with male headed households - female-
headed and female managed households seem to function differently. Women in the latter appear to have more voice as a result of their relatively large economic contribution, even with regard to responsibilities concerning household expenditures.

In general, women determined the everyday household activities in the neighborhoods studied. The crucial role performed by women in these poor households depended on their ability to utilize myriad (usually informal) networks to secure their contribution to and management of the household, and the ability to make available and/or use existing productive resources. In addition, this role also depended on women’s views on their reproductive power to determine when to become pregnant, and who will assist in raising children and/or doing household tasks. Of course women are capable of more than childcare and household chores. Because the organization of responsibilities by women of those tasks assigned to them (more or less independently of the male partner) is rarely translated into more status and power, there is little cause for tension. The reproductive power of women supports the power of labor, enabling the male partners to concentrate on earning income or increasing earning potential.

The crucial role performed by women in the daily livelihood of households is overshadowed by prevailing views on gender, (the division of) labor, and power within and outside the household. The perception that men must be breadwinners - a task that usually takes place outside the home - automatically implies that they derive a certain identity from this. This identity is often amplified by and exists in relation to cultural beliefs about the position of the male in society and results in, for example, a relatively male-dominated labor market. This high level of male labor-market participation has resulted in relatively higher incomes; males also generally decide what share of this should be devoted to the household budget. Contrary to popular belief, the role of women is not confined to the household: women extend themselves beyond the household and into other networks. The degree to which they do this is of course dependent on factors such as cultural background, household composition and the perception of self in the household and society. All these factors influence the way in which women negotiate their positions within the household.

Due to institutionalized disparities in the socio-economic roles of men and women, each performs tasks, which produce different levels of power, status, and recognition. This inequality is exacerbated by a tenuous socio-economic context characterized by income inflation, decreasing opportunities for women in the formal labor market, and the absence of an adequate social security system. These factors force women to rely on their social networks. The partner and children are important “allies” in these personal networks, men serve to obtain status and income while children (and other relatives) act more as a “buffer” - especially when men fail to live up to what is expected of them. Men, children and others help to lighten the burden and vulnerability of women under such conditions of hardship: a shared load is half the load.