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THE IMPACT OF URBANIZATION ON THE WELFARE OF WOMEN
THE CASE OF BRAZIL

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THE IMPACT OF URBANIZATION ON THE WELFARE OF WOMEN

THE CASE OF BRAZIL

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INTRODUCTION

The present document, far from being a profound analysis of the impact of urbanization on the welfare of women in Brazil, aims only to stress some of the differences between women's and men's socio-economic situation as they emerged as a result of the last decades's style of development (rapid urbanization being one of its characteristics).

It intends also to explore some of the possibilities to improve the general conditions of society as a whole with a special emphasis on women's wellbeing.

It starts with some general considerations necessary to the understanding of the Brazilian situation in regard to women.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND URBANIZATION

Until the century's third decade, Brazil was basically a rural country. Most of its population lived dispersed in farms or very small villages. The economy was centered on primary activities and coffee was its main and practically only export product. The thirties are, in general, seen as the breaking point into an industrial era. From that time on industrialization, based on an export substitution strategy, started to develop until it became the main dynamic force in the country's economic development.

The country had, however, even at that time, an important urban tradition. Cities such as São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Salvador and some others were in existence for many centuries already, exhibiting a slow but steady population increase.

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The changes in the economic profile were accompanied by many other changes, the territorial distribution of the population being perhaps the most visible. In the short period of a few decades Brazil was transformed into a basically urban country. The census figures show that the urban population that represented 41,1% of the total population in 1940 (when the process of rapid urbanization was already showing its effects) jumps to 56,1% in 1970 and to almost 70% (67%) in 1980. The urban population is now over 80 million inhabitants.

The rural population showed, for the first time, a decrease in absolute magnitude in this period.

Although natural population increase is still considered very high (the fertility rate was 2.9% per year in the 1960-1970 decade and 2,49% in 1970-1980) the increase in urbanization was mainly due to migration. The new attraction exerted by the cities in terms of more opportunities for work, public and social services and other amenities was followed by the stagnation or decline of some of the rural areas forcing people out of the farms and small villages. In other rural areas the forces of "progress", represented by the introduction of capitalism (modern technology, new forms of capital-labour relationships, agricultural productivity increase etc.) produced similar effects, "freeing" people for migration.

The occupational structure also changed drastically as one would expect. The predominant participation of the primary sector in the overall economy gave way to the rise of the secondary and - mainly - the tertiary sector. This last one - the services sector - grew more than proportionally as a result of the inability of the industrial sector to provide jobs in sufficient quantities to absorb the wave of migrants. In some areas, as in the very poor and populated Brazilian Northeast, urbanization was not in direct connection (in regional terms) with industrialization. Most of the job opportunities for the migrants that nevertheless came to its main cities, were offered in the service sector, very many of them in what is called (in the absence of a better concept) the informal sector of the economy.

The development was also characterized by a high degree of concentration of the population and the economic activities in a relatively small number of cities and in the most developed regions of the country. The officially recognized nine metropolitan areas encompassed, in 1980, almost 30% of the total population. Their growth rate was well over the country's average in the last decade (3.98% against 2.49%).

Regional disparities are very evident in almost every aspect. Life expectancy at birth for instance is over 20 years higher in Rio Grande do Sul, the southern-most state of Brazil than in Rio Grande do Norte, in the Northeast (1).

The distribution of income also follows concentrated lines both in terms of regional and interclass or interpersonal distribution. The Southeast, with 43% of the total population, was responsible for around 65% of the internal product in 1970 (2).

The distance in terms of social classes is also huge and increasing. The 1% richest rural proprietors increased their participation in the total rural income from 10.5% in 1970 to 29.3% in 1980. The 1% richest in the urban areas from 13% to 14% (3). The 50% of the urban population in the lower income strata that in 1970 had 16.01% of the income got only 14.90% in 1980 (4). Most of the families in the country (over 60%) have to live on less than two minimum wages a month which is indeed a very meager sum of money (5).

The cities tend to reproduce, within their boundaries, the inequalities of the system. The space is highly segregated and the access to services and amenities very asymmetrical. The poorest people tend to live in the most distant areas where services and facilities are inadequate both in quantity and quality or in slums and squatter areas, that also exhibit very low "quality of life".

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(1) Andrade, Thompson A. "Desenvolvimento Regional e Urbano no Segundo Brasil" - in Costa, Manoel A. (ed.) O Segundo Brasil Perspectivas Sócio Demográficas, Grupo de Parlamentares para Estudos de População e Desenvolvimento, Rio de Janeiro, s/d, p.187.

(2) Ibid. p.188

(3) Jornal do Brasil, 27 de set. de 1981 (IBGE Census Figure)

(4) Brasileiro, AM - "Serviços Básicos para Áreas Urbanas" - Revista do Serviço Público (to be published).

(5) a minimum wage is equivalent to 60 dollars approximately (July '83)

In view of the above it is easy to conclude that the social question is a very complex issue in the country. The majority of the population (men and women) can be considered very poor or, at least, poor (in terms of access to income and basic services). This evidence has been used by many well-intentioned people and by government as an argument against considering the women's situation as a special case of an underprivileged category in need of special attention, translated into specific policies and services. This attitude reflects also in the unavailability of data that consider sex as a variable. However, the situation of women in Brazil, as one will see, is in many respects much more difficult than that of man in similar conditions.

The data above also shows, I believe, that the rapid urbanization process the country experienced and is still experiencing is, itself, a product of an overall process: its development (Urbanization is not expected to slow down significantly for at least two or three decades although it could change its pattern). Therefore, it is sometimes difficult to identify a causal relationship between urbanization and a specific variable as, for example, women in the labour force (6). This does not mean to deny specific situations which are only possible or more present in the urban context.

WOMEN AND URBANIZATION

The general situation of women in Brazil is not very different from that of many other countries, especially those of Latin America. Society (and the women themselves) tends to view women in their reproductive role mainly, involved in child bearing and socialization and domestic affairs. This role, although valued, does not bring them prestige and economic independence. Their contributions in productive terms is generally overlooked. The work performed within the home frontiers, although vital for the functioning and preservation of society, is not considered officially as internal product generated by the country. Women are confronted with less alternatives for outside work. They tend to be confined

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(6) Both are products of an overall process. See Nadia Youssef (Women and Work in Developing Societies) for a comparison of the different effects of industrialization and urbanization

to "female" occupations that enjoy less prestige and payment. Even when performing similar functions, they tend to receive a smaller salary than men. Their increasing presence in the outside labour market has not so far freed them from their traditional duties in home caring. The majority of those who work outside their home and still have to care for the family needs cannot count on supporting services (such as creches) or relieving technology. They have less access to education and health facilities. Confronted with a moral double standard they tend to submit themselves to the will and decisions of the male.

In this situation improving or worsening in an increasingly urban context? This is not an easy question. A lot of attention to it is still necessary until one can be relatively sure about all its dimensions. This attention should also consider the different concrete situations the women live in, influenced by things such as the region where they live, their race, their class status, their level of education and so on.

There are, however, some already-identified tendencies which affect women (and society) differently in the rural and urban context. Some very evident ones refer to aspects mainly connected with their reproductive role. A study sponsored by UNICEF and conducted by IBGE (the official statistic bureau) estimates that the fertility rate (using the Brass methodology) in the urban areas in 1970 was 4.88 children against 8.28 in the rural areas (7). The average for the country was 6.20. This figure dropped to 4.26 in 1977, undoubtedly influenced by the rapid urbanization process under way. The birth rate in the last two decades, as seen, had dropped from 2.90% per year to 2.4%. The mentioned study also shows that other variables, such as education and income, also correlate with the number of children a woman has. Women without education or very little (one year) tend to have more children both in the urban (7.41 in 1970) and in the rural context (8.95). When they reach high levels of schooling (eight years or more, for instance), the number of children per woman drops (2.16 in the urban areas and 3.55 in the rural ones). In terms of family income one can observe a

(7) IBGE/UNICEF - Perfil Estatístico de Mães e Crianças no Brasil: características sócio-demográficas 1970-1977. Rio de Janeiro, IBGE - UNICEF, 1982. p.34.

similar tendency. In those families that have to live with less than half of a minimum wage, the fertility rate was estimated at 7.60 children in the urban areas and 8.74 in the rural ones (1970). In the 1 to 2 minimum wages category these figures drop to 2.25 and 2.10 respectively (blurring the urban-rural differences).

The process of rapid urbanization is also correlated, in a positive manner, with the improvement of the women's health. Life expectancy at birth, for instance, estimated at 34.6 years in 1910 (before urbanization began to speed) is nowadays at 65.5 (8).

The life expectancy indicator is one of the few that favour women in relationship to men. Life expectancy is a bit lower for the men, being situated at 61.3 years. The reasons for this fact are still not clear but are very probably connected with the higher exposure of men to risks of accidents, stress and emotional strain derived from work outside the home in an increasingly competitive world. If the trend of women to work outside their home continues, it is likely that differences between women and men in this respect will tend to diminish or even vanish.

Life expectancy tends to be higher in the urban context than in the rural one. It also varies - showing sometimes a difference as huge as 20 years, as it was mentioned before - depending on the socio-economic conditions of the region where the people live.

The situation of women in the labour market has been one of the most studied aspects related to their socio-economic conditions. Part of the literature is devoted to test the hypothesis that the advent of the industrial (and urban) society represented a significant gain for the women, stressing their productive role and assuring them more equality vis-a-vis the men. Saffioti, one of the first writers to be concerned with the subject in Brazil and a leading figure in the field argues against this theory. After a lengthy study on the evolution of the socio-economic conditions of women in Brazil she affirms that as the capitalism is incapable of absorbing all the potential labour force, represented by all the

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healthy and adult people in a society, its defense mechanisms operate in order to perpetuate itself using "natural" factors to exclude women, avoiding therefore an overt exposure of its contradictions (9). The great majority of women are marginalized, maintained outside the labour market. This marginalization is justified by their responsibility in the reproduction and socialization of the new generations. She concludes that:

"(...) the class society neither introduced woman to (outside home) work or enlarged her possibilities of self-determination as an economically productive being". (10).

The available official data, which in many respects are biased and do not properly consider women's work either in the fields or in the urban areas, show that an increasing number of women is now in the labour market. The activity rate (percentage of economically active women over the total population of women of more than 10 years of age) that was 13.6% in 1950, 18.5% in 1970 went to 29.6% in 1976 (11). The corresponding rate for men was, however, 74.2% at that time, illustrating the large distance that separate the sexes in this respect.

Industrialization and urbanization are, very probably, factors that influenced the changes in the women's activity rate. However, the losses observed in the period in the buying power of salaries (due to inflation and governmental policies) are also to be considered. Women might be entering the labour market to contribute to the family survival.

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(9) Saffioti, Helelieth. A Mulher na Sociedade de Classes: Mito e Realidade. Petrópolis, Vozes, 1976 p.368. For analysis of a specific case within Brazil see Giffin, Karen - Opportunities and Ideologies: Women in High - Status Professions in Bahia, Brazil; Ph.D Thesis, Dept. of Sociology, University of Toronto, 1979.

(10) Ibid.

(11) UNICEF - Mulher, Sociedade e Estado no Brasil, op. cit. p.17

They are, however, occupying the less prestigious and less well-paid positions. They tend to remain in the service sector and hardly reach the higher posts, almost always the command of the man. The differences in payment received by women and men are not only large, favouring men, but are also becoming greater (this fact was observed in the period of 1970-1977 by IBGE/UNICEF study already mentioned). It is also interesting to note that women's participation in the labour force drops after the age of 25, when they are more likely to be engaged in child bearing, child rearing (12).

An analysis of the average female income as compared to the male one shows that even in similar age and educational levels women tend to receive less in all the occupational categories, even in those that are considered predominantly female occupations (as teachers and domestic workers) (13). A study made in São Paulo, the main industrial center in the country, showed that men received over 50% percent more in all the professions in the industry (14).

Although this situation affects women in general, some categories of women are in an even worse position. Black women, for instance, have less access to job opportunities and are also discriminated in terms of the income they receive. A bit over 28% of the economically active men were receiving from zero to one minimum wage in 1976; more than 46% of the economically active women were in the same bracket. Of all the economically active white women 37.0% as against 68.2% of black women were receiving one minimum wage or less in the same year (15). The average wage tends to be higher in an urban context which explains partially the rural exodus.

However, it is also important to note that in the cities the greater predominance of the cash economy - as compared to the rural areas - has had, in some regions, a negative effect on the level of nutrition of the urban family. It is very hard, or sometimes impossible,

(12) Ibid. p.21

(13) Ibid. p.25

(14) Instituto de Pesquisas Econômicas - São Paulo, quoted in the above, p.25

(15) IBGE - Aspectos da Situação Sócio-Econômica de Brancos e Negros no Brasil (por Oliveira, Oliveira, Porcano e Araújo Costa, Rio de Janeiro, DEISO/IBGE, 1981, mimeo.).

in cities to have a direct access to food as still occurs in some of the rural areas.

The phenomenon of the female head of the family is constantly seen in association with poverty. The data available seems to indicate that although the number of homes headed by women is increasing (it represented 13% of the households in 1970 and 15.4% in 1977), mostly in the urban areas (which in 1977 represented 17.5% against 10.8% in the rural areas) its hypothetical direct correlation with poverty needs further clarification. About 48.3% of the families headed by women live on half a minimum wage or less. A bit more than 43% of the families headed by men are in this situation. The situation is more critical in the urban context where 42.5% of the families headed by women live with that amount of money, compared to only 29.5% of the families headed by men. The differences in the rural areas are irrelevant.

WOMEN AND POLITICS

The formal participation of women in the political sphere is still very low. Very few women reach the role of political representatives in the Legislative bodies.

Brazil has now only one woman senator and four Federal Representatives (out of 420 members in the Federal House of Representatives). Only 18 women were elected in 1978 for the 23 State House of Representatives. Less than 2% of the present mayors are women.

The women's presence in high positions in the Executive Branch in all three spheres of government (federal, state and municipal) is almost insignificant. Only one woman is now holding a very important position as the Ministry of Education. Education is still considered to be a more "feminine" occupation, and, therefore, more permeable to women's demand. There are quite a few female Secretaries of Education now at the State and local level.

The reduced amount of political power women enjoy is perhaps the most important reason why policies, legislation, law enforcement and social programmes against sex discrimination favouring women's conditions are still very inadequate in the country. Women are far from enjoying an egalitarian situation in many fundamental issues related to their day to day life. Even the formal gains obtained such as the constitutional mandament of equality for all without any discrimination in terms of sex, race or religion and the law that determines medium size and large firms to provide creches for the children of their employees remain without enforcement.

The situation will hopefully improve as a consequence of a process of political openness. This process already brought back direct elections for Governor and many of the citizen's rights in existence before 1964. Society is becoming increasingly more articulated and participative. Political Parties and Union's are starting to be reorganized in a more autonomous fashion and quite a few new associations came into life.

Thousands of community-based associations were created, most of them with the help of the Catholic Church mostly in the slums and squatter areas in the big cities.

Women's presence in social movements is a notable fact. They have been very active in the process of redemocratization. One of its leading groups was a feminist group called Feminine Movement for Amnesty.

Their action is also becoming increasingly important in social movements connected with the improvement of life conditions. Their actions in this respect is most of the time directed to the local and state governments and centered around concrete issues. They are mainly demanding better sanitation conditions, school and creches for their children, cheap food, better and more secure housing, and health facilities.

Urbanization, bringing people together and fostering the consciousness raising process is undoubtedly helping this type of involvement.

The migration flux to the cities and the enlargement of the deficit of urban and public services has influenced the process. Very many initiatives, most of them counting on predominant women's participation, have been developed as an attempt to overcome the deficiencies of the urban system. Many women in squatter areas and in the urban periphery are directly involved in hard tasks such as house construction, alternative water systems and social services supply (16).

The mass media, mainly TV and radio (17) is probably also an important factor in this social movement.

POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES FOR WOMEN DEVELOPMENT

A significant and positive change in the status of women (and also of the poor people in general) in Brazil will depend, as it is obvious, on processes that involve society as a whole. It will mostly depend on structural changes that will undoubtedly affect the present distribution of power in society. It is now generally agreed that the discrimination women face cannot be seen as a mere man-woman domination relationship although this is perhaps its most visible face. It derives from factors, such as the social division of labour and the correspondent different roles attributed to women and men in society and the different values assigned to those roles. The difference between productive and reproductive work is also part of it. The productive work, that generates goods and services for general consumption

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(16) UNICEF is giving technical cooperation in the development of a very interesting programme with the Brazilian Government. The Programme in Rio (Urban Community Development Programme) gives support (technical as well as financial) to projects in education, health and sanitation in the squatter areas. The initiative was of the communities themselves, mostly by their women. For a summary, see Brasileiro, Ana Maria et alii - "Assignment Children" 57/8, UNICEF - 1982.

(17) There are more families with TV sets in Brazil, a tropical country, than with refrigerators.

is mainly a men's attribution. The reproductive work, that generates goods and services for the direct use in the reproduction of the social agents in their every-day life is basically a women's task (18).

Nevertheless there are several measures that may benefit women in a given context, exploring the already existing political, cultural, economic and administrative possibilities.

These measures are, themselves, part of the political process, and therefore affected by (and affecting) a given power configuration.

For the immediate future, as one should not expect a revolutionary process in the country, or a drastic cultural change in terms of the perception and treatment of women in society, it is very likely to expect the continuation in different combinations of the general orientation and policies already in existence.

The decisions taken in the past by a country will continue to condition its policies and programmes, including those that affect women. These policies and programmes will also be influenced - and will maybe influence - the political and economic processes underway.

The political "openness" will stimulate demands and pressures from the underprivileged and for specific groups, such as the women, to better their share in society. Ten out of 23 of the recently elected Governors were elected by the opposition parties (for the first time in almost 20 years), with formal commitment to social changes. The Governor of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Minas Gerais, the most developed, industrialized and populated States are among them. A greater popular participation is likely to introduce important changes in society.

(18) See CEPAL, "Aportes para el diagnostico y la promocion de la integracion de la mujer en el desarrollo de America Latina y el Caribe" - E/CEPAL/CRM. 2/C.3 , 1973 quoted in Barros, Carmem Políticas Y Programas para la Mujer , Santiago, UNICEF, 1982, p.11

The "openness" could very well , however, bring back some of the old populist practices (based on cooptation and restricted and controlled concessions) that will help some persons and groups including perhaps the women - to improve their situation but will tend to maintain the overall class distances. Populistic measures could also affect, in a negative fashion, the inflationary process.

The other very relevant process, this one operating very clearly against social policies and programming, has to do with the economic crises. It reached the country badly. The huge process of external indebtedness - never so bad in the whole history of the country (over 100 billion dollars)- is confronted with a dramatic internal crisis (inflation is now over 120% a year , recession had reached practically all the economic sectors and unemployment is also very high and increasing). Redistributive mechanisms, favouring the lower income strata seems to be more difficult to be found in a period when the richness of the country is getting smaller. (19).

One, however, does not know how a crisis such as this one affects the position of women in society. Being yet the "weak" sex, in terms of power, they will probably suffer first the effect of the economic crisis, losing their jobs, getting smaller salaries, ceasing to count on the already inadequate supporting services and social equipments... The opposite, however, is also possible. Representing a cheaper labour, the demand for their work could increase. History shows that in periods of crises, as in the world wars, women were able to advance both social as well as economically. The gains to be obtained through the political process could also make a difference.

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(19) However one should keep in mind that during the period known as the "Brazilian miracle" (early seventies) the new affluence did not benefit equally the social classes. The income distribution became more concentrated. (See Tolipan, R. & Tinelli - A Controvérsia sobre a Distribuição da Renda - IPEA).

Analysing the poverty issue in Latin America, Wolfe concludes that two broad orientations underline the diagnosis and prescriptions presented by the different sectors (government, political leaders, social scientists, social groups...) to eliminate or diminish poverty: a) to help the underprivileged to become increasingly aware of their situation and interests and more able to elaborate realistic strategies to alter the situation; b) to make the other elements of society aware of the situation of the underprivileged, inducing them to act to improve the situation of the underprivileged (20). In the first case one would expect the underprivileged to free themselves through autonomous strategies based on well informed solidarity processes and their vision of the social order. In the second case the strategies are directed to the State, to the international order, to the rich and powerful, to the well intentioned persons and only in a secondary manner to the people to be benefitted by the actions.

Possible approaches to one or other orientation are: demographic policies (connected with family planning or migration control), employment expansion, social assistance, social control or repression and oriented selfhelp. He analyses each one of these different approaches in the recent history of Latin America.

One of his assertions is that it is easier for government to act in an assistentialistic or semiassistentialistic manner, distributing free or subsidized food, housing, education and health services for the poor than to change employment structures and land tenure in such a fashion to guarantee an adequate survival for the more needy . (21).

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(20) Wolfe, Marshall - "La pobreza en America Latina: Diagnosticos y Prescripciones" in IIPES/UNICEF - Planificacion Social en America Latina y el Caribe , Santiago, 1981 p. 573.

(21) Op.cit p.581/2

He also mentions that some of the self help mechanisms in fashion nowadays are seen mainly as a device to introduce some betterment in the quality of life of the population at a low cost, without any real egalitarian change.

The questions related to poverty and to obstacles to change are relevant in the discussion of the women's situation. Most of the problems women face derive from their situation of poverty. Some of them, as we have seen, are however aggravated by their female condition. The urban context seems to have favoured some aspects of the women's life and worsened others.

The awareness of all these factors and the pressure of the feminist groups and movements are increasingly introducing the women's issues into every-day life, social action and governmental planning.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) is one among many international, national, governmental and private institutions that are studying the question, making recommendations and supporting actions that could bring benefits to women. Having the wellbeing of children as its initial concern UNICEF has, as a result, become also interested in the mother, on the assumption that the wellbeing of children is highly associated with that of the mother and with her performance.

Later on, and mainly in connection with the Women's International Year (1975) and Decade (1975/85), UNICEF passed to be concerned with women in general, in their different life cycle and roles. Emphasis is given to the poor and needy women both in the rural and urban areas. Women are seen as an instrument to better life of the family and as a direct beneficiary of programmes and projects that consider them in their reproductive as well as productive role.

Referring to UNICEF policy oriented towards improving women's participation in economic activities, Youssef points out that:

"Incorporating the concept of women as economic providers confronts the necessity of considering the relationship between women's nurturing role and their productive responsibilities, thereby recognizing the multiplicity of functions women perform and the needs they confront outside of the motherhood role" (22).

Other programming and related areas of interest are those connected with the basic services strategy (education, health, sanitation and supportive services such as creches and recreational activities), and with special programmes on Primary Health Care. Attention is also given to projects that aim to increase the participation of the women, in the family, in the community, in the region and in the nation and to those that aim to improve the quality and quantity of information on the women's situation (official statistical systems, studies and research).

The development of programmes and projects are based on the recognition of the importance of the participation of the beneficiary in the whole process. This participation is viewed not mainly as a device to keep costs down (although this is frequently a factor considered) but as a way to guarantee effective and desired (by the women themselves) results. There is also a worrying about the right choice of the technology to be used (appropriate technology) as a way to avoid capital intensive and nature degradating ones. Costs concerns are also present as a way to ensure higher coverage and political viability.

All these actions and the advocacy role performed by that institution and by the others are themselves part of a social and political process underway in a given context. They are influenced by the existing factors in society but I believe they can also influence them, in a positive manner. There is still a long way to go before we are able to live in a more egalitarian and democratic society. Although I would tend to agree with Wolfe that the changes to come favouring the underprivileged will depend on the actions taken by the underprivileged themselves, there is space for different agent's actions.

(22) Youssef, Nadia - Programmes promoting women's participation in economic activities - UNICEF 1982. mimeo. p. 1

