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Women as Builders of Alternative Futures

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Introduction

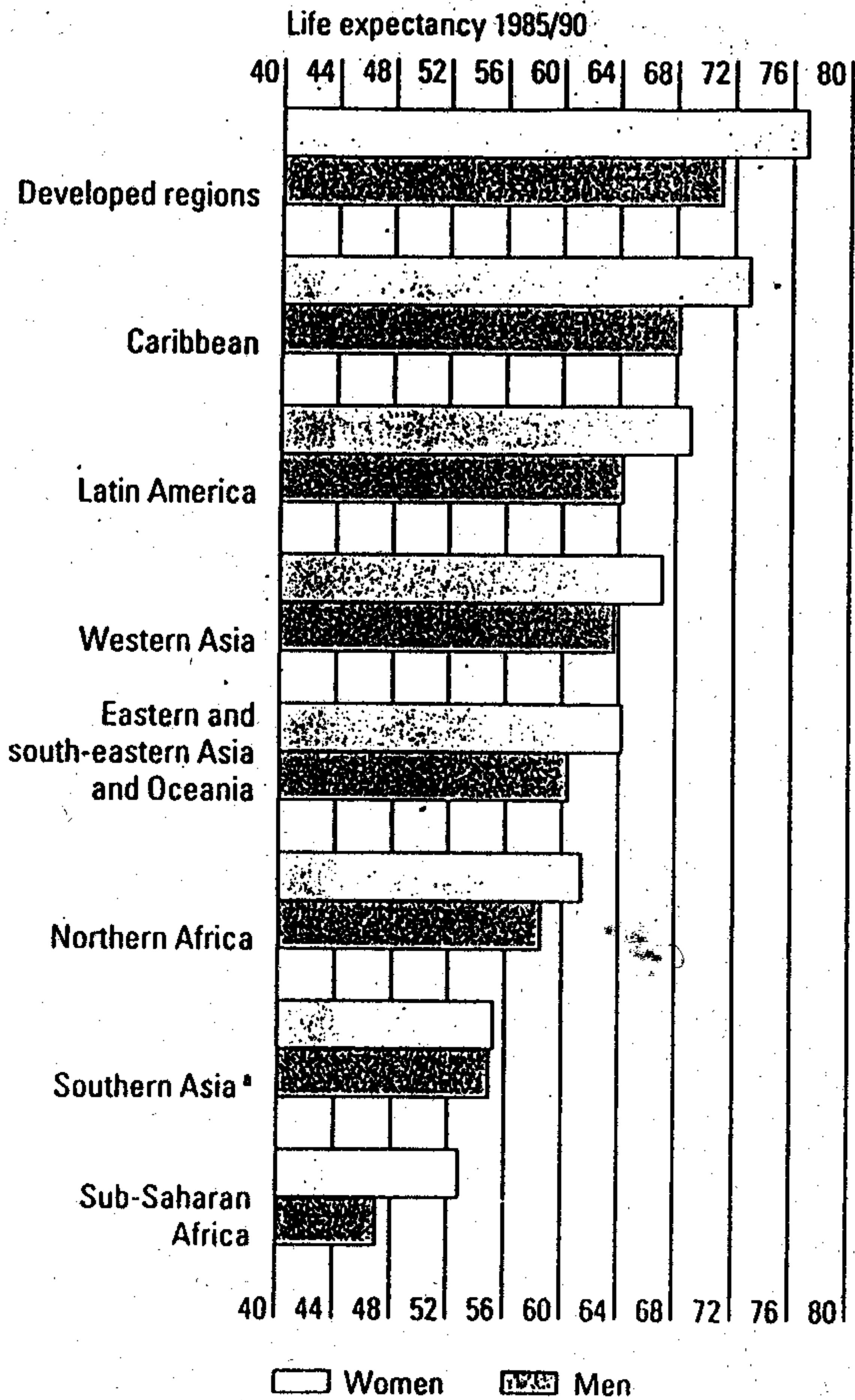
In this paper, the author contends that women have a particularly important role in the building of alternative futures and that over time they have developed capacities particularly suited to the society of the future. The time has come for women to become visible. In considering the role of women in society and their contribution to it, we shall look first at the statistical presence of women, then at the kinds of society to which they contribute, the alternatives they can contribute, and, finally, the type of society that may emerge.

1 Women in the present and in the future (in quantitative terms)

According to the UN text, UN Women 1970-1990 (1) in the near future women will represent fifty per cent of humanity. In statistical terms they are not yet quite the other half of the sky. Life expectancy at birth has increased more or less universally for both males and females. All over the world women live longer than men. (see Figures 1 and 2). At the global level, male life expectancy is 63 and female life expectancy, 67. In the more developed world, 71 for males and 78 for females. In the developing countries 61 for men, 64 for women. Of course these data are highly diversified depending on the country. In Western Africa men may have a life expectancy of only 50 and women of 52; in Central Africa life expectancy may be 49 for men and 53 for women. In Southern Asia life expectancy is 58 for both, and in Eastern Asia 69 for men and 73 for women. For the whole of Latin America, life expectancy for men is 65 and 71 for women and in North America 72 for men and 79 for women. Despite the diversification, women have a higher life expectancy almost everywhere, despite the high rates of maternal mortality and culturally bound deaths of women at an early age in some parts of the world. (Fig. 3). If we look at other indicators, women's situation has improved in education (Fig. 4), though there are still serious gaps in Africa and Western Africa and even more serious gaps at the secondary school level in Africa and Asia (Fig. 5) In short, in statistical terms women are more present in society than ever before, they enjoy better health, (though there is still much to be done in some parts of the world), they are better educated (efforts to extend primary education having been met with success) although it should be remembered that statistics reflect insufficiently drop-outs and temporary absence from school for family reasons or for rural work.

Figure 1:

Women live longer than men almost everywhere

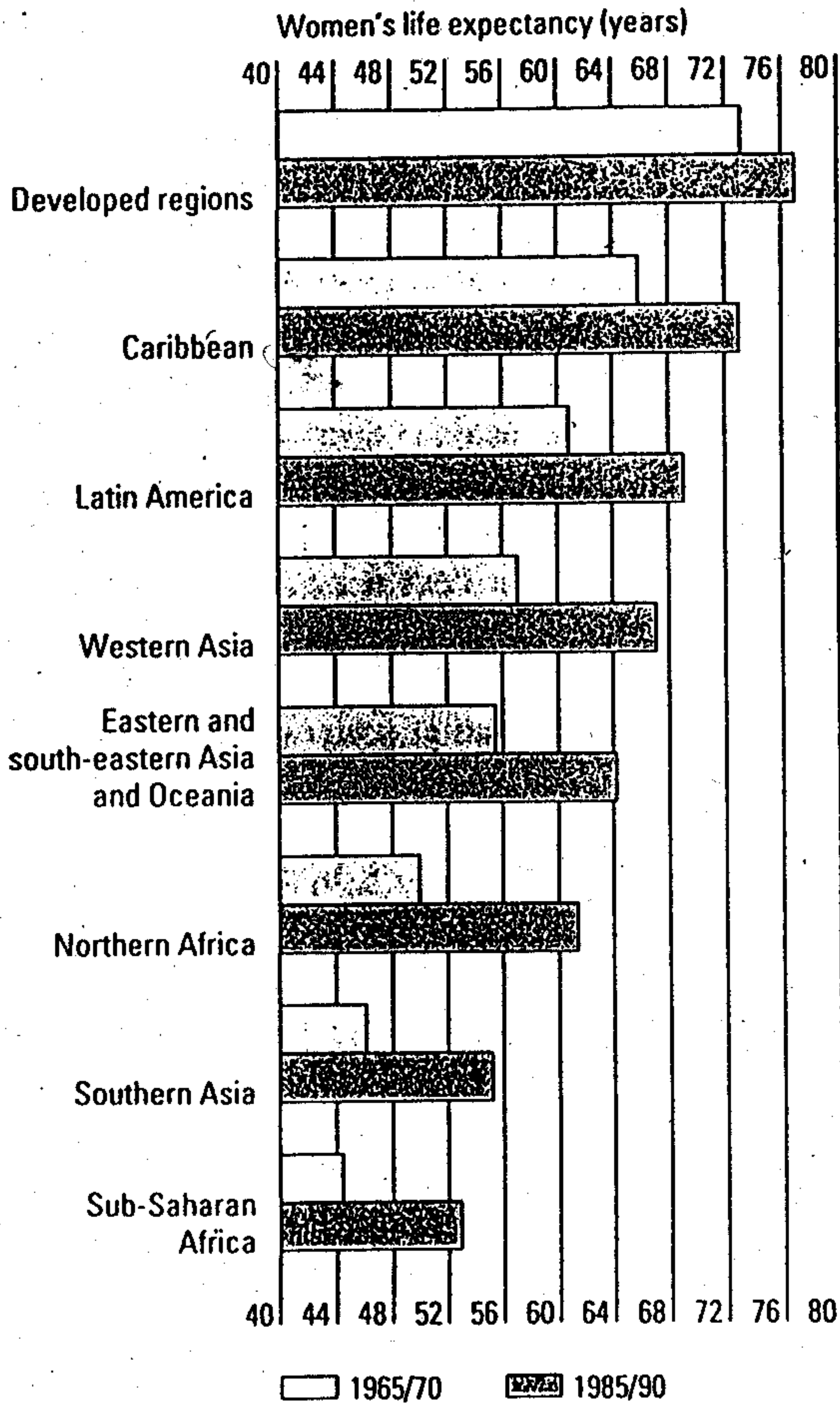


Source: Averages for each region calculated by the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat from *World Population Prospects 1988* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.89.XIII.7).

^a Estimated life expectancy at birth is lower for women than men in Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives and Nepal.

Figure 2:

Women's life expectancy is increasing everywhere



Source: Averages for each region calculated by the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat from *World Population Prospects 1988* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.89.XIII.7).

Figure 3:

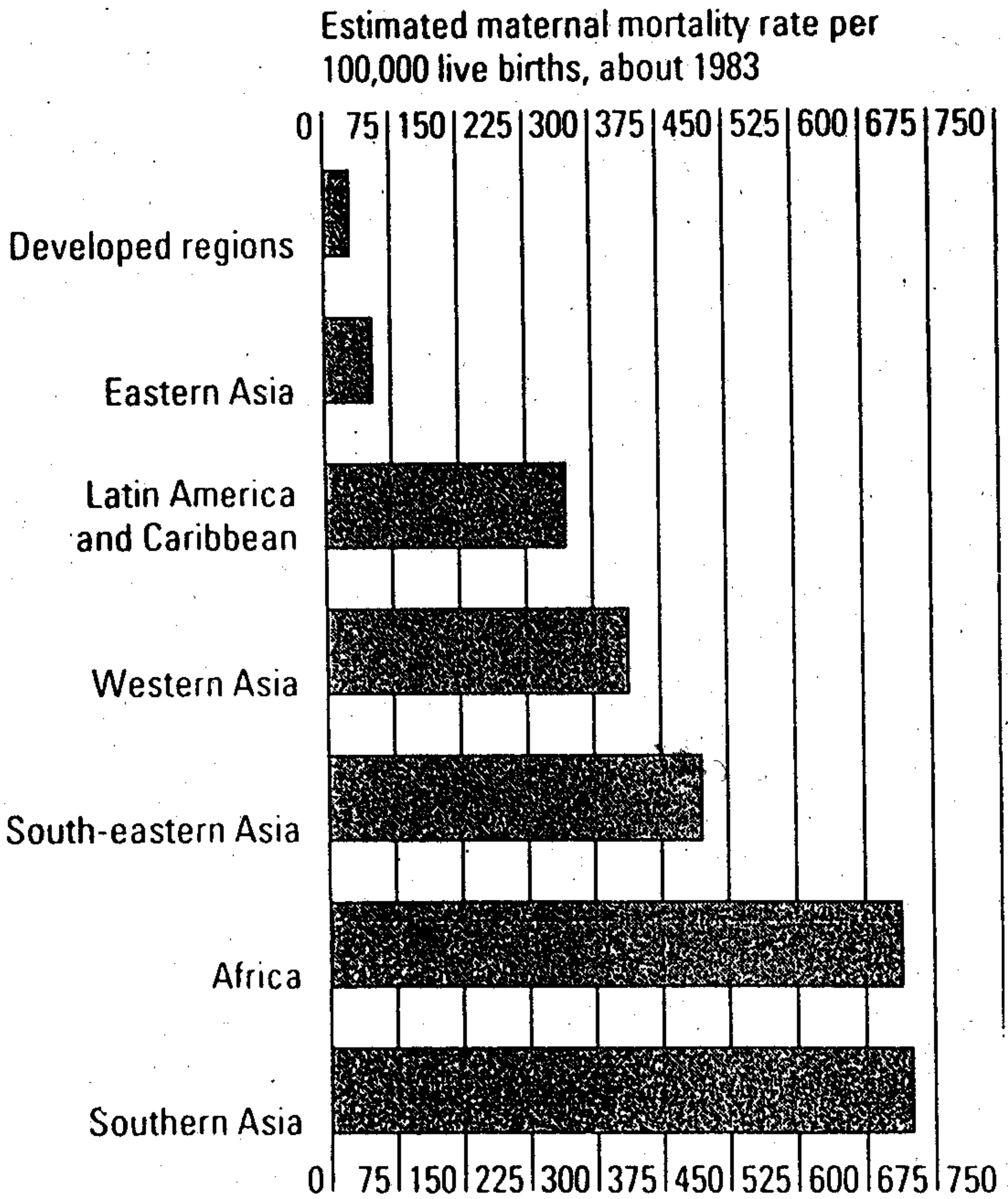
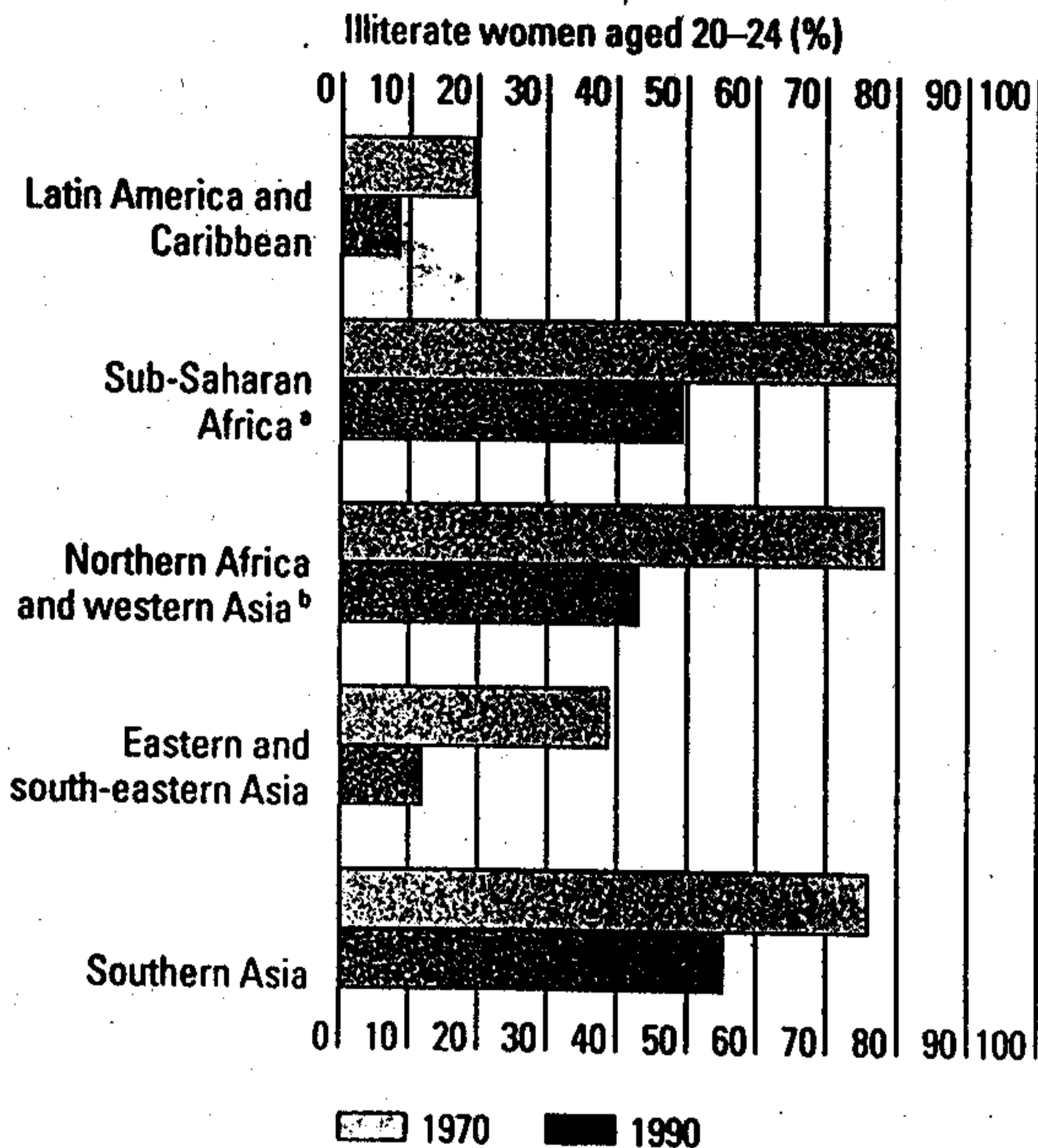


Figure 4:

Illiteracy rates are falling for young women but are still MUCH HIGHER FOR YOUNG WOMEN THAN MEN
Over 40 per cent of young women are still illiterate in Africa and southern and western Asia



Note: Based on total population of women and men aged 20-24 years in each region.

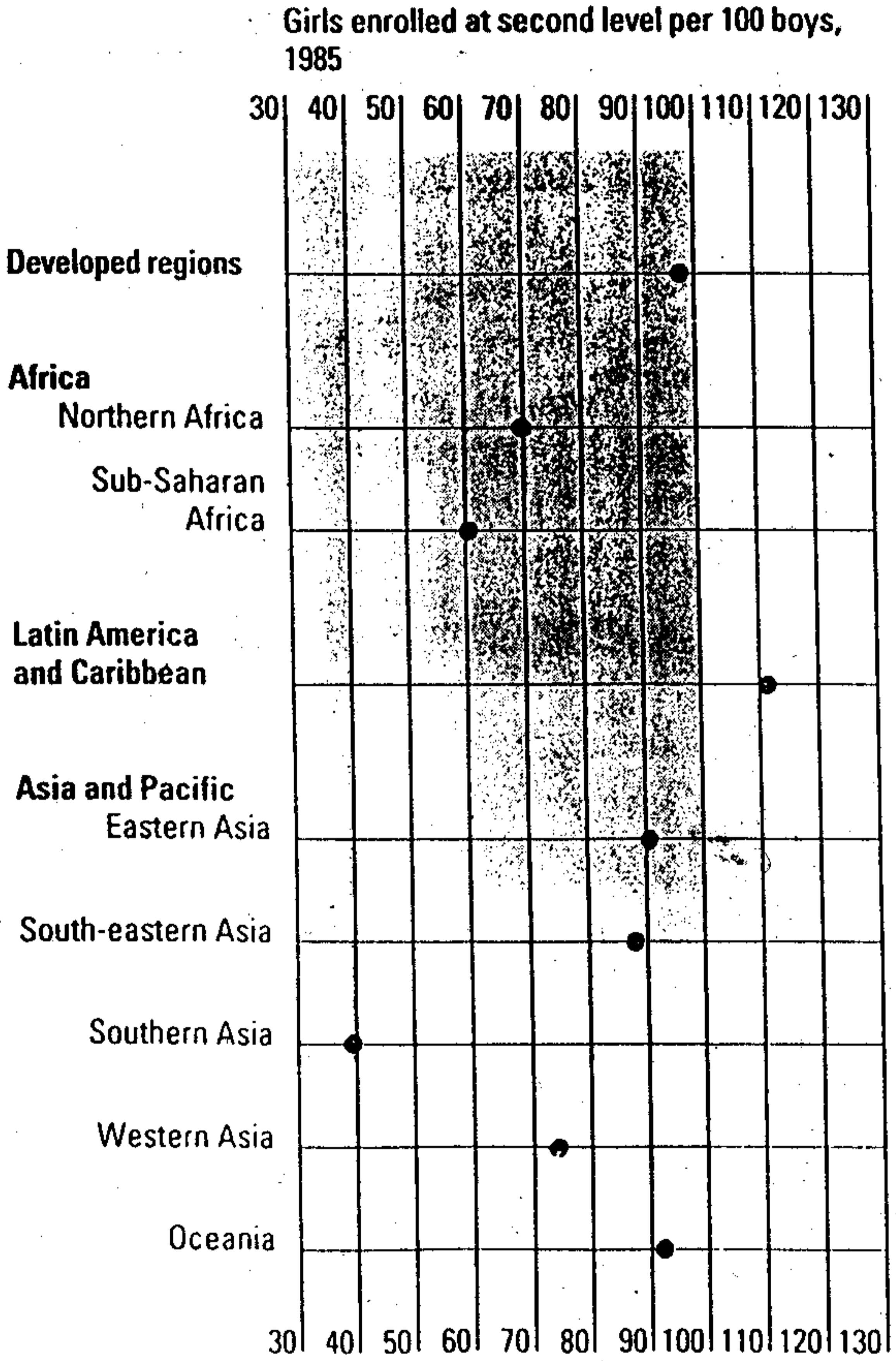
Source: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, *Compendium of Statistics*.

a Includes Sudan; excludes South Africa.

b Includes Somalia and Mauritania; excludes Cyprus, Israel and Turkey.

Figure 5:

Girls' secondary enrolment still lags behind boys' in much of Africa and Asia



2 Women's role in society

Women's role in society has been changing considerably but not too noticeably. One important indicator of this changed role is the increasing number of women-headed households due to separation, divorce or widowhood, as well as migration from South to North and within Europe. At the global level, women-headed households now constitute around 30 per cent the total. Another indicator of the increased role of women in society is the increased share of women in the labour force. All over the world women are working more both in and out the household. This phenomenon is though coupled with job segregation and wage discrimination, which is especially serious in Japan, Cyprus and Korea, where women earn from 50 to 72 per cent the male wage for the same job. In terms of jobs, there is a significant female presence in the primary sector. In terms of women's role in society, it is interesting to note that there is still a low percentage of women in decision-making jobs in the public sector (as in the former socialist countries where the percentage was around 27 per cent) and practically none at all in South East Asia. The number of women in management in the private sector and in Non Government Organizations (NGOs) and social movements has been increasing. It seems that the less formal sectors of society such as NGOs are more receptive to the growing awareness of women of their role in society. In sum, women are gaining power, as heads of households and as a presence in NGOs. Their public presence is still low, although there is a strong female presence in education. Their participation in the labour force in general is increasing, albeit with difficulties.

3 The Society within which women live.

The society of the present and of the future is one of increasingly rapid change. An aspect often not recognized - variations in the pace of change - affects women especially. Economic, technological and recently political changes are extremely rapid. Instead, behaviours related to culture - that part of social life related to value priorities in turn related to choice, behaviours and action - change much more slowly. Women seem to be caught between these two sets of changes. The technological changes related to their work, and even their private choices, are rapid, while changes in their own behaviour, and more so in the behaviour of the society of which they are part, are much slower. The United Nations Project on Household, Gender and Age, coordinated on behalf of UNU by the author (2) (and which will be referred to in more detail later in the paper), shows this gap and discrepancy very clearly. As an example, in Brasil and Argentina, the technological changes in the textile industry affect women very strongly, but in

cultural terms the attitudes of society at large and of households, and even the labour market mechanisms themselves, change very little. Not only is our time one of increasingly rapid change, it is also a time of increasing complexity. This is a widely discussed issue and methods of addressing complexity, for example the chaos theory, are studied. From the social point of view it is important to stress that complexity breeds uncertainty and hence there is a need to find ways of coping with it. As Donald Michael (3) wrote many years ago, although it is impossible to manage complexity and change, it is possible to learn to live in it and not be destroyed by it. The society of the future will find itself increasingly in a situation of constant tension due in theoretical terms to rapidity of change, complexity and uncertainty. This will also be a consequence of tensions between ethnic groups, that is in a sense related to complexity, which is a global phenomenon, and the division between the rich and the poor of the world. This gap has always existed but it is becoming wider and more visible because of telecommunications and communication in general. There is a greater awareness of the gap, of its widening, and of the fact that this is due to certain decisions taken by the rich at the expense of the poor. In this context reference should also be made to the tensions between the North and the South of the world. To conclude, what should be particularly stressed in this context is people's growing awareness all over the world of self, of their rights and of their contribution to society. This awareness process is irreversible.

4 Women and visibility

Although women have always been active in society, their role has not been visible. In our view the time is ripe for change and for women to take on a more visible role. This is especially necessary given the need to create alternatives for the future, since no one future can be considered the best future. Women in our view have developed this capacity for alternatives better than men. Women have always performed extraordinary services to society. The Beguines, as lay women taking care of abandoned women in cities. The great poet Dante Alighieri recognized the inspiration of women and their understanding of complexity. In Asia, the Shamans with an understanding of the non-visible were women. In our century as leaders of peace movements. It is also important to refer to the role of women in times of war or reconstruction. The women of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were the first to constitute groups for reconstruction, after the second world war the women of Warsaw were the first to rebuild schools. In Kenya, when land was taken away from the men thus threatening survival, the women of Kenya took to the streets to reclaim their right to survive. It is surely not by chance that women are particularly active in human rights movements or in ecological movements, as Vandana Shiva in India or Wangari

Mathai in Kenya. It seems that women are not the builders of industrial society but rather those who have suffered from it and tried to remedy its mistakes.

5 Women as builders of alternative futures

Women are the bearers of capacities that are not necessarily only a female prerogatives. They could also be male capacities if men were to choose to acknowledge them. Such capacities have been described in more detail in several other articles by the author. For reasons of time, they shall only be referred to very briefly and in list form in this paper (4).

A. Individual capacities:

- Flexibility

Women are accustomed to moving in and out of the labour market for child bearing and raising. Women also tend to have to change jobs more frequently than men.

- Rapid response to emergency situations

Women are accustomed to coping with unexpected situations and emergencies in their everyday lives with children. They have learned to react rapidly

- Superimposition of tasks

Women are accustomed to doing several things at once: they cook the lunch, while working at the loom or computer, they tend to the needs of elderly parents while caring for their own families, shopping, sewing etc.

- Definite priorities

Women are accustomed to establishing clear priorities. For example schooling for their children is more important than producing more in the kitchen garden.

- Adaptability

Women are accustomed to adapting to a timing that is not necessarily the mechanical timing of enterprises but is more related to human timing. The above are all capacities that will be particularly important in a future of rapid, interrelated change: flexibility, rapid reactions and

clear priorities are all essential. They are capacities that can be learned. Women have been using them over decades and centuries. They were often not recognized as capacities, and considered evidence of inefficiency and improductivity. They are the capacities that will be needed to survive in an uncertain world.

B. Social Capacities

Women's social capacities are also particularly suited to the new society:

- *Solidarity*

Women are accustomed to developing forms of solidarity in their everyday life, establishing a network of links with women of all cultures. This can consist in the exchange of information on how to feed children, nurse the elderly etc. Everyday needs create solidarity far more than any political or ideological affiliation. Reference can be made to the migrant communities in Germany (Turks), France (Algerians) and England (Asians). Tensions are not related to everyday issues of survival but to great issues far from concrete needs.

- *Exchange*

Women are accustomed to interacting and exchanging rather than competing.

- *Overcoming of barriers*

Women have the capacity to ignore hierarchical barriers. These social capacities will also be increasingly important for survival in the future. Women have managed to preserve them through the centuries. Men may also learn to use them.

6 Household Gender and Age: a United Nations-University (UNU) Project.

This Project coordinated for the UNU by the author of this paper, was conducted through field work carried out by local teams in eight developing countries over a period of ten years (Argentina Brasil, Chile, China, Columbia, Ivory Coast, Sri Lanka, Kenya). The Project was based on the assumption that macro-changes, whether technological, economic or other and micro-changes at the level of individuals and communities had been well analyzed and that what had not been analyzed or understood was the interrelationship between the two levels: how the macro-level influenced the micro- and vice versa. In this context, it is particularly interesting to investigate how the carriers of the capacities listed above may be able to have an impact on the macro level and on what Elise Boulding (5) has referred to as the "nooks and crannies" of society, which is where changes can take place in time where revolutions seem to fail.

7 Possible alternatives based on women's role in society

There are several examples of alternatives that already exist in society, based on women's attitudes:

- Ecology

Women presented many ecological examples at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 showing how women on the basis of their knowledge are capable of developing a relationship with nature, based essentially on subsistence and survival and not on the exploitation of nature. During the Summit, the examples were so numerous that at last it was possible to acknowledge the role of women in this sphere.

- Education

In almost all societies women are responsible for the education of children up to the age of seven (an exception being some of the Islamic countries where the woman's responsibility ceases when the boy child reaches the age of three). The early years of a child's education are the years that are culturally bound and feel the impact mainly of women's attitudes.

- Community life

Other examples of alternatives are small communities in which the female principle of survival

and solidarity are crucial. Examples can be documented by research in Peru (Peru Muher), in the Philippines and in Zimbabwe (African Women's Clubs).

These are only some examples of how women's capacities can support the survival of communities. Unless these kinds of capacities are developed and become visible, the survival of human kind will be in jeopardy. Humanity's only possibility lies not in revolution but in an important, slow historical process of change.

NOTES

- 1. The World Women 1970-1990: Trends and Statistics, United Nations, 1991**
- 2. Eleonora Barbieri Masini and Susan Stratigos, Women, Households and Change, United Nations University Press, Tokyo, 1992**
- 3. Donald Michael, Learning to Plan and Planning to Learn, Jossey Bass, San Francisco, 1973.**
- 4. Eleonora Barbieri Masini, Women as Builders of Alternative Futures, in Futures, Butterworth and Co. Ltd., vol. 19, n. 4, August 1987.**
- 5. Elise Boulding The Underside of History, Westview Press, Boulder Colorado, 1976.**