

FEATURE

A monthly features service on scientific, technical, and educational subjects pertinent to development.

Words: 1365 approx.

DEMYSTIFYING MOTHERHOOD

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"Womanhood is nothing to be happy about, though I don't regret because I married, but women have a lot of work to do, especially when they get married. Children cause a lot of work. In fact, the work for them isn't tiring, but a lot of work at home and commitments are tiring, and these things men don't care very much about..."

So spoke an old village woman in Kenya in the course of an interview conducted by project researchers of the Office of International Science of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). The project, officially called Ethnography of Reproduction, sought to contribute to the knowledge of the impact of development on women's roles and on population.¹

Studies of women's roles or women's status and fertility have multiplied in recent years. Now, halfway through the Decade for Women, some of them are yielding results — information about women's place in society, their hopes and aspirations, and about how and why they make decisions about family size. All point to the complexity of the reasons behind fertility decisions.

Population planners and, therefore, population programs had until very recently largely assumed that fertility was basically irrational. That this myth is being dispelled is partly the recognition that the motivation behind

1. A report entitled *Village women, their changing lives and fertility*, was published by the AAAS, 1776 Massachusetts Ave NW, Washington DC 20036, USA, in 1977.

childbearing is practical as well as psychological: for many women children are needed to help at home and on the farm, to provide security in old age, and to define women's place and status within the family and community.

Recognition has finally come that women, as well as men, need some sense of purpose and accomplishment in life. For too many women, this is provided only in terms of motherhood. By isolating women from the mainstream of economic, social, and political life, many cultures have given them no real alternative beyond childbearing.

Conventional wisdom would have it that if women had fewer children, they would be free to continue their education and enter more in the labour force. It is now realized that this may be putting the cart before the horse: education and employment may in fact determine fertility.

The number of years of schooling a woman has is the most apparent and measurable element in the factors affecting fertility. Thus, many planners have seized upon education in the attempt to get a quick fix on the population problem. Numerous studies do, in fact, corroborate a relationship in which the more education a woman has, the fewer children she is likely to have. In Turkey, for example, it was found that illiterate women have on average 4.1 children, while primary school graduates have 2.6. The rate drops to 1.9 for women having completed secondary school. In Argentina and Paraguay, illiterate women have twice as many children as women with secondary education.

How education and fertility interact is not yet fully understood. Education exposes women to new kinds of information, and by removing them from their family surroundings, can bring about a change in self-image, fostering different values and aspirations. It can delay marriage and, in some cases, inhibit it altogether by reducing marriage prospects. It can open the door to employment outside the home, and trigger social and geographic mobility. Literacy certainly facilitates the spread of birth control information and increases knowledge and understanding of various contraceptive methods.

The more education a woman has, the more likely she is to work outside the home. But how does employment itself affect fertility? The prevailing theory is that the more difficult it is made for a woman to care for her children and home while working, the fewer children she will have — unless of course she abandons work.

Participation in the modern labour sector appears to substantiate this view, as most urban jobs are not compatible with child care. They also expose women to new ideas and people, remove them from family influence, and help to change family dynamics by calling for greater involvement of husbands in household work. Studies on the value of children in eight countries, supported by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), confirmed that women's employment affected her status in the family, which in turn affected her fertility decisions and desires. It was also found, however, that the location of the job and the occupational category — professional vs manual or service jobs — were more important factors than simply working.

In practice, however, most women in developing countries are engaged in traditional occupations — agricultural work on family farms, crafts, produce marketing — that seem to have little effect on fertility because they do not conflict with child care. This is particularly so where extended families can provide child care.

Both education and work opportunities are facilitated by urbanization because of the greater opportunities in the city. But if the move to the city represents freedom from the constraints and traditions of rural life and a chance for higher education, employment, and new independence for some, for others it means being cut off from the child care facilities afforded by the extended family and a new, more rigid division of labour.

In Korea, a study of how the changing role of women since 1945 has influenced fertility behaviour concluded that a degree of urbanization — down to the small town level — affected the amount of spouse participation in major household jobs and the degree of egalitarianism in decision-making. The more "modern" the wife's role — defined in terms of role preception, communication, decision-making and participation — the fewer children she

tended to have. Interestingly, these "modern" women often wanted as many children as their traditional counterparts, but did not carry out their desires.

Education and work experience were the major factors influencing the emergence of modern role attitudes and more egalitarian husband-wife decision making. Age at marriage and the level of education were the most significant predictors of fertility levels in Korea, and age determined the practice of contraception.

Still, the most important element in the fertility equation is probably woman's power or rights within the family.

In many countries and societies, women begin life unequal. The birth of a daughter is often greeted with disappointment, or as an old Korea proverb would have it: "A daughter lets you down twice; once when she is born and again when she marries". The general devaluation of women's traditional roles, and few opportunities to enter new ones, means that their contribution to family welfare is ignored.

Born unequal, girls grow up unequal. It has been shown that they feel the pinch of food scarcity earlier, more frequently, and more severely than their brothers. In Bangladesh, for example, the mortality rate of girls under five is 30 to 50 percent higher than for boys the same age. Fewer girls attend school, and while more women are now attending school, they still account for two-thirds of the world's illiterates.

Girls are also married as unequals. Although most countries have set a minimum legal age for marriage, girls in traditional societies are often married young, to a partner chosen by their parents. As the husbands are generally older, the girls' subordinate position is compounded.

Thus, in many parts of the world having a large number of children is the best available means women have of meeting their own ends, economic as

well as social. As their other activities are overlooked and underrated, childbearing becomes women's major source of status. As long as no acceptable alternative roles exist, it is foolish to believe that their fertility behaviour can be modified.

It is also naive to believe that it is possible to change an aspect of society such as the status of women without major social evolution in other areas as well. Policymakers can only facilitate the changes underway by removing the tangible barriers that limit women's access to education, work, and personal autonomy.

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IDRC-F131e

March/April 1980