

Women, Poverty and Demographic Change. Edited by BRÍGIDA GARCÍA, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. Pp. 311. ISBN 0-19-829487-7.

This collection gathers together twelve papers presented at a conference in Oaxaca in 1994. The theme is variation in demographic behavior of women, especially variation related to economic status. The essays are mostly decent empirical studies, though the methods and results are somewhat pedestrian.

Two introductory essays, one by the editor and the other by A. Basu, lay out the basic approach of authors included and admired. The approach is to formulate and test hypotheses of the form: "Poor women experience more/less of some social phenomenon than rich women." The phenomena in question are demographic events and outcomes such as fertility, utilization of pre-natal care, abortion, labor force participation, migration, etc. The authors are fully aware that any relationships are contingent on the given social setting; there is no pretense at uncovering or developing 'universal' results. In that sense the studies are quite dissimilar from another strand of gender research exploring the nature of households— as altruistic or calculating— that is more overtly universalizing.

Chapter 2 by N. Niraula and S. Morgan compares two Nepali villages along three indicators of gender inequality: division of labor; acceptability of women going alone to market, community center, entertainment, etc.; and decision-making power within the household. They show that these aspects of gendered behavior do vary consistently across the two villages, and that within village variation among women of different castes and classes is more complicated. But they are unable to point to any causal mechanism for the differences. One village is indeed more patriarchal; it is firmly situated within a broad cultural area of patriarchy. This is not causation. Niraula and Morgan open their article with a short methodological discussion of how two choose two villages for a case study comparison. They should have listened more closely to their own reasoning: for answers to their questions they should have been choosing villages in border areas of broad cultural groups, or villages with mixed populations, so that other environmental factors could have been 'held constant'. They needed to pick villages where there was room for action to shape the local village norms, in response to local environmental peculiarities.

Chapter 3 by O. de Oliveira reports on lengthy interviews with married Mexican women. The results are easily anticipated. Girls from poorer and more conflict-ridden homes marry earlier. These girls also then go on to define themselves through motherhood, rather than other roles.

Some of the chapters fall into the mistake of reporting statistics from non-random, purposive samples. This is especially true of Chapter 4 by E. Pantalides, G. Dominguez and R. Geldstein, who study fertility behavior in Buenos Aires. In constructing the sample, quotas were fixed for different social categories, and then youth fitting those categories recruited for participation in schools and hospitals. There are obvious and potentially large biases from such an approach. Reflecting on the high levels of contraception and condom use, one cannot help but wonder whether an intentional sample may not have generated this results. It is easy to imagine that responsible, knowledgeable and sexually active youth are more likely to be willing to respond to questionnaires. More so because the sample sizes are very small; just over 100 young women. Nevertheless, the authors bravely calculate tests statistics showing significant differences.

Other chapters do a commendable job of marshaling available nationally-representative

samples to test whether behavior varies across economic classes. S. Singh and M. Monteiro present an excellent analysis on fertility and abortion in Brazil. The evidence adduced paints a bleak picture of very high abortion rates. Because of the obvious mis-reporting of abortion, however, they are unable to determine whether rates vary between poorer and wealthier women.

Four papers use decent, straightforward social survey analysis to understand women's experiences in labor markets. Are women rationed out of lucrative formal-sector jobs? Do they receive lower pay? Do husbands dictate their wives' activities? A. Malhotra and D. DeGraff find that married women are less likely to participate in labor markets in Sri Lanka. Z. Sathar and S. Desai follow with a contrasting chapter, showing that women in Pakistan almost never work in the non-agricultural sector. K. Donato and S. Kanaiaupuni use an interesting, large survey of Mexican women migrants to the U.S. The paper is marred by inadequate attention to the 'reflection problem', where finding that variables measuring group or average behavior explain individual data is not evidence of social effects or social norms; the average behavior is more than likely correlated with omitted variables that also influence the individual behavior. M. Tawanda argues that in Mali social status within the family (as wife, daughter, in-law, etc.) influences migration decisions. His interpretation is that the significance of this social status factor implies patriarchy: family members lower in the hierarchy are more constrained. But the relationship (as always) turns out to be more complicated, and results indicate quite clearly that there are important omitted variables.

The volume then concludes with two chapters on health care and gender issues. P. Govindasamy reports on the low use of pre-natal care among Egyptian women, and consequent high rates of maternal mortality. S. Desai closes with a polemical interpretive essay on the link between maternal education and child health. She fears that social scientists unwittingly offer justifications for a sexist attitude and policy-- "Women, and not men, or the polity, should do more as caregivers." Her argument is worth making, but must be tempered by a more frank appreciation of what economists do. Ultimately the only reasonable way to decide how to allocate funds or social engineering priorities is to compare findings from better econometric studies.

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