

Nasra M. Shah (ed.). *Pakistani Women: A Socioeconomic Demographic Profile.* Islamabad: Pakistan Institute of Development Economics/Honolulu: East-West Center. 1986. xlv+412 pp. Illus., bibliog., index. Price: US\$ 12.00 for hard-cover; US\$ 10.00 for paperback.

Until very recently, women did not claim the attention of academicians in Pakistan. Short of cliché-ridden write-ups glorifying their exalted and sometimes imagined roles, little else was written to reveal the reality of women in the country's tribal, feudal, changing society. The exceptions have been reports and case studies, mostly commissioned by the Government or by international agencies. These, however, have remained confined to departmental files and a limited readership. The few titles which have appeared in the last ten years or so, besides a few autobiographies (e.g. Jahanara Shah Nawaz's, Shaista Ikramullah's), include Rashida Patel's book on the family laws, Parveen Shaukat Ali's study of women in the Muslim world and Kishwar Naheed's collection, in Urdu, of papers on some aspects of women in Pakistan.

Nasra M. Shah, in compiling *Pakistani Women*, has made a useful addition to this sparse volume of literature on women. She has put together under one cover a large substance of data-based information. The book comprises eight papers, five of which have been written by the editor herself while a sixth has been co-authored by her and Iqbal Alam. The other two contributors are Asghari K. Awan and Mehtab Karim.

The volume is arranged in two equal parts. Part I deals with demographic aspects and Part II with the socio-economic situation of women. However, it is the demographic perspective which dominates even when socio-economic factors are discussed. Areas covered include population composition, fertility, mortality, marriage, migration, health and nutritional status, education, employment and fertility controls.

The stated reason, and a commendable one, for compiling this book is the need for redefining women's role in Pakistan. In Nasra Shah's view, socialization of policy-makers is essential to enable a new definition of women's place and recognition of their contribution in society. By highlighting the position of women through substantiated facts and data she hopes to invite the attention of the policy-maker for an attitudinal change towards women.

The data sources used in the different articles range from the censuses of 1951 to 1981, Pakistan Fertility Survey (PFS) (1975), National Impact Survey (NIS) (1968-69), Labour Force Survey (LFS) (1974-75), Housing, Economic and Demographic Survey (HED) (1973), to a number of case studies. However, for a book published in 1986 it is difficult to comprehend why more recent data were not utilized. In fact, all the papers seem to rely on the mid-70s data. The latest census of 1981 as well as statistics compiled by the Manpower Division and other government departments, which were surely easily accessible to the writers in this volume, have been largely overlooked for purposes of analysis. The argument that the latest data are not essential for establishing trends or exploding myths cannot hold in the case of this book; for the contributors are highly qualified academics who have written very technical papers and cannot be unaware of the significance of the latest statistics. It is disconcerting to be told that 40 percent of all migration is in urban-urban stream and to discover that that was in 1973; or read about "current" health status of women and find that the figures are actually for 1977-78; or that education for women is not considered essential by society, according to the 1968-69 NIS. Surely, with the change in the socio-economic milieu, this attitude may well have lost its force and needs to be investigated rather than be assumed as permanent.

A recurrent theme in all the papers is the inadequacy of available data. Nasra Shah, in her paper on the "Female Employment: Trends, Structure, Utilization and Constraints (Chapter 7), very succinctly highlights these discrepancies in detail. She holds a number of factors responsible for the confusing data on women. These include inefficiencies in collection of data (e.g. male field workers collecting information from women), qualitative differences between data sources, definitional problems, and underreporting, among others. As a result, no definitive picture of Pakistani women can be drawn. For instance, she points out that in the case of the rate of female labour force participation, there is no consensus. The various census data show that 5 - 10 percent of women over ten years of age are in the labour force, while the different household surveys contend that the female participation rate is twice as high. The HED survey, because of its sample size, has special problems and needs to be cautiously treated. Thus, accurate measuring is very problematic. (However, Shah concludes that one-fifth of adult Pakistani women are in the labour force.)

The paper which perhaps best reflects the downgraded status of women in Pakistan is Asghari K. Awan's "Health Services, Health Status and Nutrition" (Chapter 5). The statistics presented by her (albeit dated) on women's health have revealed the reality of women in Pakistan. Female life-expectancy is lower than that of the males, and female mortality-rate in the 15-39 years age group is much higher than the male mortality rate in the corresponding age-group. This happens to be women's period of peak fertility, and in Pakistan maternal mortality is up to 6 - 8 deaths per

1000, i.e. higher than in other countries. Chronic anaemia is common in women, especially those who are pregnant and lactating. Abortion is a serious health hazard. Female infants are less immunized and given lower nutritional food than male infants. All these are testimony (though not explicitly stated by the author) to the fact that a woman has no say in matters related to her person, e.g. number of children, nor control over her body. She is relegated to an inferior position in the family and consequently in society.

Whereas the book succeeds in bringing together relevant statistics about women — even if only up to a certain time — it is not explicit in linking this information with women's position/status. The implications, therefore, have to be derived by the reader.

Another aspect that rankles throughout the reading of the *Pakistani Women* is the unnecessary and unfounded praise for Government efforts for women's uplift. For instance, Shah says in one place that the "present government has taken major steps to improve the status of women" (p. 36) — a statement likely to be vehemently challenged by women's rights activists. Awan, in her paper, states that "In Pakistan, the health status of women and children, particularly mothers and children, is an explicit concern of the government" (p. 75). She, however, goes on to report that the GNP allocated to health was 0.74 percent in 1970-71 and 0.76 percent in 1977-78, and then concludes that "Pakistan has a long way to go in adequately meeting the health needs of . . . its female population in particular" (p. 203). There are other such examples.

Similarly, popular myths about women, their role, contribution, etc., in society are not critically examined. For instance, the traditionally prescribed role of women in Pakistan is that of wife-mother-housekeeper. Shah, who declares that she wants a redefinition of women's roles, nevertheless, says that "Work outside the home should not be pursued at the expense of the house and children, of course" (p. 32) — a puzzling statement in the light of her own findings that one-fifth of adult Pakistani women are part of the labour force and that 53 percent of the total female labour force is in non-wage employment. These figures are veritable indicators of the reality that women are performing, or are having to perform, roles other than those of mother-wife-housekeeper. Another example of an entrenched attitude is evident when Alam and Karim discuss marriage patterns and dissolutions. Commenting on the low divorce rate, they write: "Marriages in Pakistan are highly stable" (p. 90) — a highly debatable conclusion.

Despite these shortcomings, the book remains a useful one as it provides raw material to build upon. It is recommended primarily as a reference book.