

Book Reviews

Alia Ahmad. *Women and Fertility in Bangladesh.* New Delhi: Sage Publications. 1991. 184 pp. Price: Indian Rs 185.

A book on the relationship between the status of women and fertility, Ahmad's study is based on the available literature on the subject as well as empirical findings from a small group of women in two villages and Dhaka city in Bangladesh.

The book comprises eight chapters, out of which the first four are devoted to a review of earlier studies and description of macro-level information on the determination of women's status and fertility in traditional societies, including Bangladesh. Then, based on the information collected from 58 rural and 20 urban women, the next three chapters present empirical results on the status of women in the context of their perceptions about the value of children, the demand for children and the costs of fertility regulation. Each chapter, with a summary at the end, provides a variety of arguments and some evidence on those aspects of women's status in Bangladesh which are an outcome of the social and economic processes that tend to perpetuate insecurity among a majority of women. The insecurity is regarded as conducive to the high demand for children and preference for sons.

The book, thus, is not only a good source of information on theoretical linkages between women's status and fertility but also provides some evidence on the related issues in the context of Bangladeshi society.

Although the questions and issues addressed by the author need to be fully endorsed, the utility of the book is marred by the method of analysis and classification of data into three categories of high, medium, and low status of women. In the discussion in Chapters 3 and 4, the status of women is determined not only by some quantitative variables but also by such qualitative variables as ownership rights, the role and the decision-making power of women inside and outside the home, family structure, etc. But the measurement of 'status' is confined to three conventional indicators of income, education, and employment, which have their own direct effects on the reproductive behaviour of women. Moreover, the division of the sample into three status categories of high, medium, and low also shares many limitations, as no weights or thresholds have been used to determine a given status.

Because of the use of a very small number of women in the sample areas (20 in urban, 30 and 28 in each of the villages), the statements made about power,

status, and fertility relationships cannot be generalised. Although the information provided in the book exhibits different ways in which women suffer from a low and subjugated position in the family, the way the data have been categorised and presented does not give a clear indication of the magnitude of the effect of female status on fertility, which presumably is one of the objectives of the study. In fact, the number of women in each cell is too small to yield any significant variation in different indicators of reproductive behaviour by status (of women). I think a more analytical approach, including a better methodology of measuring female status and using a varied and a larger sample, would be more appropriate to study the relationship between female status and fertility.

Nevertheless, the study should be useful to obtain a concise overview of the low socio-economic situation of women in Bangladesh, and of the extent to which that situation persists till now – largely because the socio-cultural institutions discriminate against women and provide a limited opportunity structure to them.

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