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Women's Education And Fertility

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BEFORE reviewing the findings concerning the relationship between education and fertility, we need to examine the way in which the concept of 'education' has been formulated. Studies of the impact of education upon fertility have almost been concerned with the quantity of education (which is relatively easy to measure) rather than with the quality or content of education, which is much harder to evaluate. While length of education may be the determining factor in some of the casual explanations linking education with fertility (e.g. raising the age at marriage). Educational content is obviously more significant for those effects on fertility which operate through changes in attitude, self-perception and aspiration.

There is a general agreement that women's education is associated with a reduction in fertility levels; it has been claimed that the inverse relationship of education with completed family size is one of the most clear-cut correlations found in the literature.

However, a number of questions still remain to be answered concerning this relationship. These include:

- ★ the conditions under which education does not reduce fertility, and whether there is a threshold point beyond which education will always reduce fertility;

- ★ just why it is that education should reduce fertility, and the exact mechanisms by which it does so;

- ★ the relative contribution of male and female education to the reduction of fertility;

- ★ the relative impact of education at the individual level, as compared with the impact at a societal level; and

- ★ the extent to which the provision of female education is a cost-effective method of reducing fertility, or whether there are more direct means which are equally effective.

(i) The relationship between female education and fertility is not always an inverse one. In poor countries with relatively low levels of

literacy, education may at first have the effect of raising fertility. The is because education is associated with improved health and lower levels of infertility; in addition, the practice of prolonged breast feeding is often abandoned by women who have acquired a limited degree of education and no longer observe these customs. This curvilinear relationship between education and fertility, usually with both the illiterate and the highly educated having lower fertility than those with some primary education,

has been reported from a number of countries, including Thailand, Indonesia and Nigeria. In tropical Africa, where prolonged breast-feeding is linked with post-natal sexual abstinence and polygamy, it is almost unavoidable that, at first, the spread of formal education for girls will raise fertility levels.

There is little evidence of a single threshold level of female education beyond which fertility begins to fall in every country. The exact turning point would appear to be related to the nature of the traditional cultures, the level of development, and the mechanisms through which education affects fertility.

Delayed Marriage

(ii) Why should education reduce fertility, and what are the exact mechanisms by which it does so? At an elementary level, many studies have shown a direct relationship between female education and knowledge, approval and practice of contraception. It is not clear how far this relationship is due to the greater interest of more educated women in limiting family size, and how far it simply reflects their greater access to information and services of all kinds. Contraceptive use is not always linked to reduced fertility; this is because women with above average fertility are often the first to practise contraception in developing countries. In many contexts, more important

factor linking female education and reduced fertility is the effect of education in delaying marriage.

The much broader issue which remains is, how education influences women's views on child-bearing and child-rearing. Many studies have shown that the number of children that women consider desirable declines with increasing education, as does the number of sons desired.

The essential link between education and declining fertility is through the reversal of wealth flows within the family. Where children do not receive formal education, the lifetime balance of the movement of wealth is from children to parents. Parents thus benefit from having large numbers of children. Formal education reverses the direction of the movement so that parents expend more resources on their children than they receive in return. This is not so much because education is expensive, as because education destroys the family 'morality' which obliges children to work for the benefit of the family as a whole (and hence, effectively, for their father), and makes children into individuals who work for their own benefit. From this point on, parents will benefit from limiting the number of their children who now constitute a drain upon their parents' wealth rather than being contributors to it.

(iii) Where education acts to reduce fertility by raising women's perceptions of their own worth and making them aware of a wide range of alternatives to child bearing as sources of fulfilment, one could expect female education to be more strongly related to fertility reduction than male education is. A clear majority of the few studies which have separated the effects of male and female education have found that female education has a considerably stronger and more consistent effect than male education upon fertility levels. A few studies have found that female education is inversely related to fertility, whilst male

education reveals a positive relationship; and some studies shows that providing education almost exclusively for males, as in some Muslim countries, delays the beginning of fertility decline.

Better Mothers

(iv) The impact of education on individual women can be to increase their sense of personal autonomy and their ability to make choices about their lives. The content of education is very important in relation to this issue. In some communities, the prevailing attitude is that the only real justification for the education of young girls is to prepare them to be better mothers; if this is reflected in the curriculum, it may reinforce high fertility norms. Some researchers have suggested that education should deliberately promote women's autonomy. However, in many cases it would be impossible to teach women the necessary attitudes and skills unless this was preceded by a rise in their status.

(v) To what extent is the provision of female education a cost-effective method of reducing fertility? The cost of a family planning visit is cheaper than that of a rural education programme for women. However, a thousand family planning visits will not persuade women to make effective use of contraception if they do not believe that they will gain by limiting the number of their children.

From another point of view question at issue is not whether resources should be expended on family planning or on rural education, but there is need for governments and programme planners to recognise the beneficial impact of women's education and training on a wide range of development issues, including family health and agricultural production, and to increase the emphasis and resources given to women's education.