

Older Women

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These abstracts examine the current debate in the 'population' literature concerning the complex relationship between fertility motivation and security in old age within developing countries. They focus on two studies based in rural India and Bangladesh which examine the 'value of sons' in a kinship organisation dominated by a patriarchal authority structure, patrilineal descent and inheritance, and patrilocal residence.

Mead T. Cain, The consequences of reproductive failure: dependence, mobility and mortality among the elderly of rural South Asia. *Population Studies*, 40 (1986), 375–388.

Reproductive failure is defined in this paper as 'failure to produce a son who survives and is able and willing to assume responsibility for parents who are no longer able to care for themselves'. In the type of kinship organisation (as outlined above) where the preferred living arrangement for older people – 'the cultural norm' – is either with a married son, an unmarried son or adjacent to a married son, such failure could have important consequences, and it is these the author sets out to explore. The article is based on data for 320 households in a number of Indian villages (Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh) collected in 1980 and 1983, and 343 households in a village in the Mymensingh District, Bangladesh collected from 1976 to 1978. Elderly people are defined as those whose reported age is 60 years or older (i.e. 62 men, 52 women, Indian sample; 61 men, 33 women, Bangladesh sample).

While the paper looks in detail at the living arrangements and position of older men and women, I will concentrate here on the findings relating to older women. With regard to older women we need to be aware of a number of 'facts of life' in rural South Asian communities. First, wives are 'typically five to ten years younger than their husbands'; the probability of widowhood is high and women are less likely to remarry than men. Second, males are seen as more 'productive' – in an economic sense – than females and have access to 'wage work', often denied to women due to the 'structures of purdah, the prevailing division of labour and extreme labour-market segregation'. This is more so in Bangladesh than Indian villages. Third, the *degree* to which women's lives are controlled by the circumstances of the male members of her family (e.g. opportunities for the inheritance of land) determines her life chances. So family poverty, especially in

terms of land ownership, can be important in determining patterns of living arrangements and activity. Cain states, 'under ideal demographic circumstances, a woman's progression through life is marked by the successive transfer of her dependency from one category of male to another: first father, then husband and, finally, son'. Again there are differences between Bangladesh and India, with greater opportunities for women in Indian villages.

The data show that in villages in India and Bangladesh, 81 per cent and 91 per cent (respectively) of the older people live either with, or adjacent to, a mature son. Given the age imbalance at marriage, widows will have a greater chance of living with a 'mature' son than widowers, and this is shown in the data. Settlement differences reveal that in rural Bangladesh adjacent households are more common, although when widowed, a lone elder usually moves into a son's household. The least preferred arrangements are those with a married daughter or other. However, the research indicates that in Indian villages there is greater tolerance of these 'second-best' solutions. In neither area are there 'public or community-based institutions' for older people.

In the remainder of the paper the author looks at the effects on material circumstances and mortality of reproductive failure. Economic status is measured by ownership of arable land and the samples are divided into those who are 'landless' or 'owning less than one and a half acres' – labelled 'poor', and those with more land, labelled 'less poor'. It is not clear from the paper how many older women in the samples own land – though it is not common. The analysis shows that in Bangladesh, amongst those older people who do not live with or adjacent to a son, poverty and early death is more common. Amongst this group, those with land are more likely to dispose of it in order to maintain themselves, their spouse and any younger dependents. Of course, the vicious circle of poverty is ever present having consequences for fertility and infant mortality. For older women caught up in this circle the prospects portrayed by this author are bleak. With regard to those women who live neither with nor adjacent to a mature son, he states: 'The reason why there are so few women in this category, either divorced or widowed, is quite simply that it is an economically untenable living arrangement – they cannot (and do not) survive'. In the Indian villages studied this 'vicious circle' is less pronounced with women being less vulnerable to the ravages of economic dependency.

In conclusion, the author asserts that 'residential patterns of the elderly are products of particular systems of household formation' and that in those areas studied he 'expects elderly people to continue to rely

on their sons as needed' and cannot foresee the timely evolution of an alternative welfare system that would diminish the importance of sons in this capacity. He asserts that perhaps 'people's reproductive behaviour is attuned to such welfare concerns' and indicates that, if so, this has important consequences for fertility rates. However, he also comments that there is little research to support this view – indeed research has revealed conflicting claims over the 'responsiveness of children in times of need'.

Carol Vlassoff, The value of sons in an Indian village: how widows see it, *Population Studies*, 44 (1990), 5–20.

This article sets out to extend the debate concerning the relationship between 'old-age security and fertility motivation'. Vlassoff questions the validity of economic arguments as explanations for fertility decisions and criticises, amongst others, the article abstracted above in her discussion. The research reported here is a small-scale study of the value of sons to widows in one village in rural Maharashtra, India. The study focuses exclusively on women's views as these have rarely been investigated, yet given the circumstances by which their lives may be controlled (outlined above) they may 'require more support from their children in their old age than men'. Their motivation to produce sons may be greater than that of their spouse for a variety of reasons. A multi-level sampling procedure was adopted. Thus a larger study of all the 464 village households was used as the basis for a more in-depth study. Analysis of household composition revealed 123 widows and 25 widowers. For all of these people demographic, social and economic data were available from the wider study. Thirty widows, broadly representative of the whole community, were then selected for in-depth tape-recorded interviews. The interpretation of this in-depth material was discussed wherever possible with respondents and others.

Before discussing the findings, the author outlines the Hindu Code which forms a part of Indian inheritance law. Full details are not given here but the main points are that women can inherit land from parents or brothers (rare); from husbands or husbands' families during their marriage (more prosperous families); from husbands by means of a will, or by direct inheritance of non-ancestral land. They cannot inherit ancestral land/property, though they are entitled to 'use the proceeds and income from the property, and to be cared for by her sons, until death'. The Indian Succession Act – the civil equivalent to the Hindu law, gives equal rights to all heirs, including the wife, when the

husband dies intestate. In the study village the Hindu Code was dominant, and in some cases women had transferred land to sons or brothers. It was common for widows with property rights to 'bequeath the land to her sons at an appropriate time', and as the in-depth interviews showed – these were often very personal decisions.

The living arrangements of the 123 widows in the village study showed the majority (54 per cent) living with a married son. The next highest category was 16 per cent living alone followed by 9 per cent with daughters; and 7 per cent with unmarried sons. Those who lived with married children were the oldest, followed by those living alone (i.e. in their sixties). Whilst it was more common for younger widows to be economically active, widows of all ages contributed to the family income and the point is made that 'co-residence did not necessarily entail economic dependency'. Indeed, it was not those who lived with married sons who lived in households with the greatest daily income (measured by total family income divided by number of resident members) – here widows living with married daughters were 'economically best placed'.

However, despite this interesting finding about daily income, those who lived with sons and were totally dependent on them in the majority of cases evaluated their situation as 'happy', whereas the perceptions of those in other situations were variable. Those who lived with their daughters expressed 'unhappiness'. In order to explore these findings further, the author uses descriptive case study material to look at the various circumstances of women classified into three groups: primary breadwinners with dependent sons living with them; widows living with sons but not totally dependent on them, and those living with sons and economically dependent (i.e. did not own land and no longer in waged work). As expected the age of respondents increases with each category and by Cain's definition of the elderly, outlined above, it is the last group who would be seen as 'old'.

The short vignettes offer interesting insights into women's lives and lead the author to several observations; in particular, that the value of sons cannot be measured in purely economic terms. The 'transfer of land' to sons is seen by many as a 'symbolic gesture' – the unspoken assumption being that they will be cared for in return. But not all widows living with sons are supported by them, indeed they may engage in active economic employment. In some cases widows without sons had the option of 'adopting' a daughter's husband and found security in this way. Unlike in the Bangladesh village studied by Cain, this and other practices appear more acceptable in rural India. However, the interviews also reveal that economic security does not

necessarily bring happiness and that the 'desire for sons' is deep-rooted. The author makes this observation: 'The additional benefits of sons seem to consist largely of intangible attributes which are culturally determined and difficult to define. They hinge upon the sons' attainment of maturity, which for the mother, seems to be measured by his ability to make important decisions for the family. They also include certain nurturing or caring functions which the son assumes for aged parents, among which are religious obligations at the time of their death. The son's observance of these duties is accompanied by a sense of completion which, it seems, is experienced by widows who live with their sons, as opposed to those in other situations' (p. 18). The continuation of the family line was also important to them and seen as something only males could fulfil. The happiest widows were those who lived with sons but who had daughters who visited them regularly. With regard to fertility motivation, this qualitative study showed that widows 'derided the suggestion that fertility was something which could be manipulated voluntarily'. They had been relatively untouched by 'family planning' and had given little thought to the number of children they might have. However, in terms of family size, one son was seen as sufficient to carry on cultural tradition.

To conclude, the author argues that 'deeply rooted cultural factors' play a crucial role in the formation of attitudes expressed regarding the 'value of sons'. The traditional sex-role divisions discriminate against women and deny them the rights of ownership and decision-making which are valued. The reader should note that the findings and lines of argument developed in these two papers led to correspondence between the authors concerning the 'value of sons' as a source of support to widows at different stages of the life-cycle. This led to two interesting papers which develop the debate.

References

- Mead T. Cain, Widows, sons, and old-age security in rural Maharashtra: a comment on Vlassoff, *Population Studies*, 45 (1991), 519–528. Carol Vlassoff, Rejoinder to Cain: widows, sons, and old-age security in rural Maharashtra: a comment on Vlassoff, *Population Studies*, 45 (1991), 529–535.

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