

Gender, Demographic Transition and the
Economics of Family Size: Population Policy
for a Human-Centred Development

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Preface

In preparation for the Fourth World Conference on Women which was held in Beijing in September 1995, UNRISD initiated an Occasional Paper Series reflecting work carried out under the UNRISD/UNDP project, **Technical Co-operation and Women's Lives: Integrating Gender into Development Policy**. In view of the intensified efforts in the aftermath of the Conference to integrate gender concerns into policy analysis and formulation, and the progress of the UNRISD/UNDP project, the Institute intends to publish several additional papers in this series to facilitate the dissemination of the project's findings.

The activities of the project have included an assessment of efforts by a selected number of donor agencies and governments to integrate gender issues into their activities (Phase I); participating countries included Bangladesh, Chile, Jamaica, Mali, Morocco, Uganda and Viet Nam. The current action-oriented part of the project (Phases II and III) involves pilot studies in five of these countries (Bangladesh, Jamaica, Morocco, Uganda and Viet Nam), the goal of which is to initiate a process of consultation and dialogue between gender researchers, policy-makers and activists aimed at making economic and social policies more accountable to women.

This paper builds on one of the themes that has been extensively explored in the UNRISD/UNDP Occasional Paper Series and in the policy dialogues that have been carried out in the participating countries: the need to scrutinize economic/social policies from a gender perspective. It provides an in-depth analysis of population debates and policies, arguing for the need to place women's human rights and well-being at the centre of both policy-making processes and academic debates.

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Executive Summary

Population policies are a central core in the totality of development efforts because of their focus on the production and reproduction of people. In theory, they should encompass the full gamut of concerns with births, deaths and the quality of life in between. In practice, however, for a variety of reasons, population policy has tended to become reduced to the manipulation of numbers: how to reduce, or far less frequently, how to increase the number of births within a given population. The major debates in academic discussions of population and development are currently being conducted between those who prioritize the acceptability of, and access to, family planning as the primary concern of population policy and those who emphasize changes in the economics of family size as the main route to demographic transition. Economists, by and large, believe that fertility behaviour falls within the calculus of conscious choice and as such, can be understood through the same choice-theoretic framework as any other form of constrained decision-making. Families will have large numbers of children as long as the benefit from each extra child outweighs the cost. The crucial issue for policy-makers interested in influencing fertility behaviour is therefore to alter the cost-benefit calculus underlying the reproductive decision. Demographers vary between those who explain fertility behaviour in terms of the structures and values of traditional societies and see demographic transition as a response to the broad processes of modernization and those who see it more narrowly as a consequence of the greater promotion and acceptability of family planning. The policy implications within the demographic field thus vary between those who would stress the relationship between levels of development and fertility behaviour and those who would stress the need for greater investments in family planning programmes.

A third group that has made considerable contributions in this field is composed of feminist advocates and activists whose work has focused largely on the gender politics of population policies. They have stressed in particular how the attempts of national and international agencies to pursue the objectives of population control have often led to the denial of reproductive choice to women to the extent of violating their basic human rights. While economists and demographers have to some extent addressed each other's arguments and policy recommendations, their debates have been curiously insulated from questions and issues raised by feminist research and advocacy in this area. Instead, feminist researchers and women's rights activists are much more visible at the level of policy and politics, and they played an important role in shaping the plan of action that emerged out of the International Conference on Population and Development, held in Cairo in 1994. Yet the perspective they bring is crucial not only for making sense of aspects of population and development that a conventional economic or demographic analysis is poorly equipped to deal with, but also to ensure that population policies contribute to the goals of promoting human well-being and agency.

This paper makes the case for a human-centred approach to the question of population and development. It sets out to demonstrate that, despite the

claims made in policy discourse regarding positive developmental consequences of lowering rates of population growth, there is little evidence that concern for human rights and well-being has played much of a role in past population policies or resulted from declines in fertility rates. In other words, the relationship between fertility decline and improvements in the needs, rights and well-being of a population is generally weak and often non-existent. The paper argues for retaining population questions at the centre of development policy but suggests that such policy needs to give fuller recognition to the intrinsic human dimension of the inter-relationship between population and development, and in particular, to the gender dimension of this inter-relationship.

A human-centred development must start from the recognition that human survival and well-being are the desired goals of all development endeavour, and since human agency and creativity helps to activate all forms of production, human beings are uniquely both the “means” and the “ends” of the development effort, of intrinsic as well as instrumental value. All development efforts have to be judged on the basis of their contribution to this overall goal. A more human-centred development will also lead to the recognition of women as key actors in the development process, not only because their survival and well-being as human beings are ends in themselves, but also because they are the actors most closely connected with the reproduction, maintenance and care of human resources. The paper draws attention to both dimensions — of well-being and agency — in the reproductive process. The former focuses on the extent to which families, and children in particular, benefit from different reproductive strategies, while the latter is concerned with potential inequalities and conflicts in the capacity of women and men within the family to promote specific reproductive outcomes on the basis of their self-defined priorities and interests. As the paper demonstrates, gender discrimination in well-being within the family and the denial of agency to women in production and reproduction often go hand in hand, suggesting that the needs and rights of girl children and the needs and rights of women are closely intertwined.

Section 3 presents some empirical insights into the gender dimensions of reproductive outcomes and processes in order to explore the comparative utility of the various approaches outlined and to demonstrate why a gender analysis, focusing on the social organization of production and reproduction, can help to provide the basis for integrating population, development and human rights perspectives in the policy arena. Using two parameters to locate different regional systems of gender relations on a continuum of “strong” to “weak” patriarchies — the degree of corporateness of the conjugal relationship and the extent of public mobility allowed to women — the paper draws on the literature from sub-Saharan Africa and Asia to explore the relevance of gender to patterns of reproductive behaviour. It suggests, first of all, that the social organization of production and reproduction in a particular context will help to determine the degree of convergence or divergence in the reproductive goals and strategies of women and men in general, and of the conjugal partners in particular. Secondly, gender relations help to determine the value given to women, and hence to the girl child, in a particular context. Where women are socially devalued, mothers as well as fathers are likely to display strong son

preference in their reproductive strategies to the extent of manipulating the likelihood of girls being born or, where such births cannot be prevented, of girls' chances of survival.

A gender analysis of fertility transition helps to challenge some of the claims conventionally made by economists and demographers. It challenges, for instance, the assertion that economic growth in the East Asian economies was characterized by equity by pointing to the severe forms of gender inequities in family reproductive strategies which underpinned it. It challenges the frequently advanced claim that women's education and economic autonomy will automatically lead to lower fertility rates. While acknowledging that women have very gender-specific interests in avoiding early, frequent and closely spaced births, because of their costs for their health and survival chances, the paper offers examples that suggest that women will be as pro-natalist as men, as long as their material interests are served by having large numbers of children. Finally, the paper challenges the claim that a single universal explanation can be found for the fertility declines currently underway in the Third World. While the availability of family planning methods does increase the ability of parents to implement their reproductive decisions more rapidly and effectively — and may, in some contexts, allow women to exercise a surreptitious control over their fertility — it does not explain the decision itself, as some demographers have claimed. Rather the explanation for fertility decline must be sought in the changes in the overall modes of production prevailing in different societies and the changing interactions this entails between people, their institutional environment and the choices they face. Population pressure on limited resources combined with the spread of market forces and the associated monetization of everyday life has profoundly affected the fertility calculus for parents as it erodes older forms of livelihoods and security and alters parental strategies with respect to desired numbers of children, their gender composition and investment in their "human capital". The precise forms that this has taken — and the extent to which it has entailed gender-equitable processes — continues to bear the imprint of older forms of social organization and cultural beliefs in the different contexts, reconstituted in the light of changing circumstances. Thus local realities intervene to shape the effect that different variables have in terms of their fertility implications as well as their implications for women's ability to participate in these socio-economic processes and the extent to which their daughters have benefited from them.

Section 4 spells out some of the basic components of a population policy that is cognisant of the inter-connections between human-centred development, women's reproductive rights and gender equity. Feminist claims that gender equality is a prerequisite for fertility decline are not borne out by the experience of many countries that have been notoriously indifferent to women's needs and interests. "Win-win" forms of advocacy can go some way towards making the case for gender equity in population and development policy, but ultimately the argument needs to be made on intrinsic as well as instrumental grounds. The gender dimension is integral to reproductive decision-making because women bear the emotional, bodily and social ramifications of having children differently and more intensely than men, and they may assess the costs and benefits differently. It is

indifference to this dimension that has resulted in the violation of women's basic human rights. However, even where there is a convergence in gender interests in relation to fertility goals within a society, gender concerns will remain if such goals incorporate and reproduce the wider devaluation of women by the society in which such goals are formed. This devaluation manifests itself in the discriminatory provision of critical expenditures in the human capital, productivity and life options of daughters as well as in more extreme forms of discrimination, including female foeticide, infanticide and life-threatening neglect of daughters.

Our discussion suggests that population and development interventions are inextricably intertwined and must be formulated in conjunction with, rather than in isolation from, each other. Consequently, the key policy elements for a human-centred population policy will include some of the recommendations put forward by economists and demographers. Family planning remains an important component of population policy — but as a means for expanding reproductive choice rather than for meeting the objectives of population control. A family planning programme, informed by a user perspective and based on delivering quality care, helps to make reproductive choice more effective and to increase women's ability to control their bodies, reproductive capacity and sexual lives. At the same time, development remains the “best” contraceptive because it allows reproductive choice to be based on higher standards of living, a reduction of gender disparities in education and health, and aspirations for a better life for the next generation, rather than a response to poverty, hunger and the erosion of basic livelihood options.

But our discussion also suggests that feminist activists are right to stress that respect for human rights must be the starting premise and central principle of both family planning and development interventions. This is the arena where some very basic questions about human well-being and agency are settled and the outcomes that we observe tell us a great deal about the extent to which a society values its people, and the extent to which it values certain categories of people more than others. Inequality in outcomes may be a part of the cultural baggage of a society but where it violates the human rights of individual actors, or groups of actors in that society — in other words, their rights to live active, healthy lives, exercise control over their own bodies and life options and to realize their full human potential according to their own priorities — policy makers who claim to represent the interests of their citizens have an obligation to address such violations. Respect for human well-being, agency and rights is not an optional extra in development; it is fundamental to the kind of development that a society wishes to pursue and it will determine how effectively that society mobilizes its full human potential.

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