

BOOK REVIEWS

Nasra M. Shah, (Editor), *Pakistani women: A socioeconomic and demographic profile*, (Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, Islamabad, Pakistan, and East-West Population Institute, Honolulu, Hawaii, 1986), pp. xxxv + 412, n/p.

Edited by Nasra Shah, a well-known Pakistani demographer, this 412-page book tells us almost everything we wanted to know, or have known, about Pakistani women – their demographic profile, socioeconomic conditions, and their rights and obligations as prescribed by religion and practised by society.

The book begins with an enlightening *Foreword* by Syed Nawab Haider Naqvi and moves on to a lengthy *Introduction* by Nasra Shah. This is followed by the two major parts of the volume: Part I which describes the demographic situation and Part II which deals with the socioeconomic situation.

In general, the book is comprehensive, easy to read and simple to follow. As the attitudes and values of both men and women in this society are well known to most Pakistani readers, none of the findings and explanations contained in the book can be termed as startling revelations. One is well aware of the type of role a woman plays in our society. The attitudes which Pakistani families adopt towards a daughter's birth, education and marriage are common knowledge; so are the current status of female health and education and the degree of popularity (or unpopularity) of birth control methods in this region.

However, the greatest merit of this book lies in its wealth of data, displayed in the form of more than one hundred tables. One can feel the immense effort that has been invested in the collection and organisation of relevant evidence which, given the nature and type of surveys and censuses conducted in the country, must have been a painstaking task. Presence of comparative statistics e.g., on the basis of sex, province, district, etc. wherever possible, has made the study more interesting.

The bulk of the introductory chapter is devoted to the discussion on

the Pakistani woman in her various social roles i.e., parental, occupational, conjugal, domestic, kin, community and individual. Very aptly, Shah observes: "In the case of Pakistani women, the parental and conjugal roles have a high degree of primacy while the occupational and community roles are secondary. The individual role is quite different from that in Western societies since individualism does not constitute a significant ideology in the Pakistani society. Rather it is the family (kin) that predominates in most major decisions regarding a woman's, or for that matter a man's, life."

An interesting addition in this chapter is Table 1.2 on page 29, which presents the conflict between what is prescribed by Islam and what actually exists in present-day Pakistan, with reference to these seven roles of Pakistani women. On such controversial issues, the reader would have liked references to specific verses of the Quran (and Sunna), or to authors who have referred to these verses, rather than one sentence in the text which merely states: "All the presented norms shown in Table 1.2 are in written form and are drawn from the Holy Quran and Sunna." This leaves the reader not only with little direction for further reference but also creates a sense of doubt as regards the authenticity of the prescriptions quoted.

Based upon the contributions by Iqbal Alam, Mehtab Karim and Nasra Shah, the part on the demographic situation discusses three basic areas: (i) population composition, mortality and fertility (ii) marriage patterns and (iii) internal migration. Supported by detailed numerical evidence from various national censuses, surveys and studies, this part indulges in discussing trends in population statistics, attitudes towards marriage and migration patterns.

As regards the determination of marriage age (of girls) and factors affecting it, Alam and Karim observe: "Although marriage is universal in Pakistan, the only sub-group that did not show such a pattern in our analysis is those women who had attended school. About six per cent of these women were yet to be married by ages 45 to 49 and were thus likely to remain single."

It is strange that the authors explain this by merely stating that school attendance may not only have a direct bearing on the timing of marriage but it may also facilitate certain attitudes or activities that are conducive to higher age at marriage. One possible explanation for such delayed marriage (or no marriage ever), which the authors seem to have overlooked, lies in the values of our social set-up. Unlike men, as a woman progresses in age and education, she reduces her "choice set" of potential husbands as an older or more educated bride is not considered "suitable" for a

younger or less-educated groom. It is for this reason that many educated girls fail to find their match, and it is very likely that a more recent survey than the Pakistan Fertility Survey, 1975 used by the authors may indicate a higher percentage of such women.

The part on the socioeconomic situation is based upon the contributions of Asghari Awan and Nasra Shah and covers (i) health services (ii) education (iii) female employment and (iv) contraceptive knowledge. Similar to the preceding part, this part is also well-endowed with statistical evidence and possible explanations of the patterns that emerge from this evidence.

As regards the nature and quality of data, three points should be borne in mind: (i) all data, except those related to population statistics, are more than a decade old, (ii) data were obtained both from surveys and censuses, and (iii) various statistics obtained using survey data are estimates of population parameters and therefore, contain sampling errors. As sources of such data are few and infrequent, it would be unfair to hold the authors responsible for the first point. Presentation of statistics obtained from surveys and censuses (sometimes in the same table, e.g. Tables 3.4 and 3.5) is inappropriate as technically these data are not comparable. The third point necessitates statistical tests (or at least quotation of standard errors) of the statistics obtained using survey data, which either were not conducted or have not been reported.

Despite this, the book is an excellent piece of reference and is highly recommended for all, both men and women.

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