Women’s Reproductive Rights, Modernization, and Family Planning Programs in Developing Countries: A Causal Model

VIJAYAN K. PILLAI* and GUANG-ZHEN WANG**

ABSTRACT

Ongoing debates on women’s reproductive rights in world conferences and conventions have heightened the need for empirical research and theoretical explanations of women’s reproductive rights. The study examines the effects of family planning programs and the processes of modernization on women’s reproductive rights.

The study involves 101 developing countries. Using linear structural equation analysis, the study finds that family planning programs reduce population growth. However, population decline does not influence women’s reproductive rights. The most important determinant of reproductive rights is gender equality. Socioeconomic development has a positive effect on women’s educational attainment, but is negatively related to gender equality. The direct effect of women’s education on reproductive rights is negative. Theoretical and policy implications of the findings are presented.

Women’s reproductive rights is a current issue of major concern internationally. International discussions on women’s rights closely examine the association between strategies of family planning programs in developing countries and reproductive rights. The rhetoric of reproductive rights is, however, contingent on the political and legal domains. Empirical studies on the effects of family planning programs and socioeconomic development on women’s reproductive rights are few.

Sjoberg and Vaughan (1993) state that American sociologists have ignored a fundamental empirical issue of “rights” which has a far-reaching cross-national or cross-cultural significance, and to which they are capable of making a substantial theoretical and empirical contribution. It is still not clear whether family planning

* Department of Sociology, University of North Texas, Denton, 76203-1157, TX, U.S.A.
** Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, Little Rock, Arkansas, 72204-1099, U.S.A.

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programs and/or socioeconomic development play a part in the attainment of women's reproductive rights in developing countries. The purpose of this article is to develop a social structural model of reproductive rights using data from 101 developing countries.

**Toward a Sociological Model: Explanations of Women's Reproductive Rights**

Family planning programs in developing countries attempt to reduce birth rates. Modernization theories have been used extensively to explain fertility phenomena. However, studies on the effects of family planning programs and modernization processes on women's reproductive rights have been few.

The theoretical model involves three major explanations of women's reproductive rights: population growth, women's education, and gender equality.

**Population Growth Explanation**

It was not until recently that the relationship between fertility decline and women's reproductive rights became a hotly debated topic both in academia and in international conventions. The relationship is, however, left underexplored empirically.

How does limiting the number of children borne influence the exercise of women's reproductive rights?

First, limiting or avoiding births enables women to exercise more freedom within marriages or consensual unions. Women who delay or avoid births can bring about significant economic advantages over women with large families when terminating a conjugal or consensual union. Having a small family can improve a woman's ability to end an unsatisfactory relationship at a low personal cost (Dixon-Mueller, 1993). Having a large family, on the contrary, intensifies a woman's vulnerability and limits her capacity to exercise equal rights with a man during marriage or at its dissolution.

Second, limiting or avoiding births enables women to exercise their political rights as more and more women engage in extra familial activities. The geneses of the social stigma in terms of women's reproductive rights originate from the "culture of silence," the powerlessness of women as a group in society. Petchesky (1990) states that the right to choose means little when women are powerless as a group in the society. Population growth has negative effect on women's reproductive rights. The slower the population growth, the more the women's reproductive rights.

One of the major components of fertility decline is the "modern contraceptive revolution" fueled by family planning programs world wide. Family planning programs lower the market costs by providing free information about birth control and supplying services free or below cost. In addition, these programs reduce