Population Policies Reconsidered: Health, Empowerment, and Rights. by Gita Sen; Adrienne Germain; Lincoln C. Chen

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Gita Sen, Adrienne Germain, and Lincoln C. Chen (eds.)
Population Policies Reconsidered: Health, Empowerment, and Rights

The appearance of this volume in the same year as the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) has been carefully planned but is also timely in a broader sense. As most people are aware, the international women’s movement—the phrase the contributors use to describe themselves—has been influential in helping to shape the views of the Conference secretariat, governments, and even the language of the draft Conference document. The volume under review is an attempt to lay out the conceptual underpinnings of the woman-centered approach to population policy that the women’s movement is promoting. Population Policies Reconsidered is the product of a collaboration between the Harvard Center for Population and Development Studies and the International Women’s Health Coalition (IWHC); it was funded by the Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA), long known for its distaste for categorical family planning programs, as part of Sweden’s contribution to the Cairo Conference.

The book’s 17 chapters bring together 37 contributors representing a somewhat uneasy mix of academics, activists, and program administrators. A majority are associated in some way with the Harvard Center, IWHC, and two of IWHC’s developing country counterparts, Isis International and DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era). In their preface, the editors comment that the publication was more difficult to prepare than they had anticipated. A weekly series of seminars “highlighted the complexity and contentiousness of the themes and strategies to be addressed” (p. xiii); and clashes occurred over terminology, values, and scientific methods. Signs of these differences are still clearly visible in the volume. While this is entirely proper in a work with scholarly pretensions, it suggests that there is less agreement over the women’s agenda than its success in the Cairo preparations would imply.

After a brief introductory overview by the editors, the volume is divided into four sections: Premises Re-Examined; Human Rights and Reproductive Rights; Gender and Empowerment; and Reproductive and Sexual Health. The first of these sections is by far the most interesting and substantial. The moral and ethical complexities that beset the population field are discussed in a brilliant and subtle essay by the philosopher and ethicist Sissela Bok. Bok’s main point is that no policy position can claim the high moral ground for all times and places, nor can any be excluded a priori. The ethics of a policy can be defined only by serious questioning of where, when, and on whom the costs fall. Bok argues that few policy advocates are willing to submit their propositions to this sort of probing, with the result that their moral justifications tend to rigidify into political ideologies against which no counterargument can be posed. The role she sees for ethics is to keep the moral
space open for continual debate. Bok also addresses the question of rights, distinguishing between universal rights and rights that people have by virtue of their national laws and contracts. While only the rights accorded by nations are enforceable at present, Bok does not argue that the concept of universal rights is without utility; to the contrary, she believes that open discussion of such rights has helped to shape the views of governments on the value of working toward international agreement on at least a limited set of universal rights.

Gita Sen, correctly in the opinion of this reviewer, places population within the broader concept of development. Disagreements over population policy are therefore rooted in “conceptual and paradigmatic differences” in the definition of development, rather than in “disagreements regarding the validity of particular scientific propositions” (p. 63). This important insight implies that notions of right and wrong in population policy will shift over time as perceptions of development problems and strategies change. Today, after ten years of structural adjustment, the costs of which are said to have been borne primarily by women, Sen sees a pressing need for greater expenditures on social programs, including family planning and reproductive health, that stand to benefit women. Hers is a theme that recurs in several contributions to the book, most notably that of Sudhir Anand (also in section one), who explores the effects of poverty on well-being and freedom. The emphasis in these two chapters, as in the book as a whole, is firmly on the demand side of the fertility determinants.

The volume’s first section contains two other chapters that deserve brief comment. Chapter 3, by Adrienne Germain, Sia Nowrojee, and Hnin Hnin Pyne, sets out the women’s agenda being promoted by IWHC. The objectives are deceptively simple, giving priority to only three programs: women’s health services, programs for men, and education on sexuality and gender. In a different form, the agenda has been circulated as “Women’s Voices ’94—Women’s Declaration on Population Policies,” which was reprinted in Population and Development Review (19, no. 3: 637–640) and has received the endorsement of numerous women’s organizations. The reach of the agenda, and the complexities and contradictions it elides, are made clear in subsequent chapters. One of these, by Claudia García-Moreno and Amparo Claro, presents an interesting and factual history of the women’s health movement. Noting, however, that women’s health and empowerment are fundamental goals of the movement, not simply means to fertility reduction, the authors also observe that “substantial diversity” (p. 53) has emerged on matters of substance, including the concepts of reproductive rights and choice, as well as on strategy. The authors also comment on the suspicion felt by many feminists that traditional population planners who have espoused the language of the movement may have done so to further their own ends.

Seemingly insurmountable problems of conflicting values, rights, and needs constantly arise as Sônia Correa and Rosalind Petchesky (in section two) think their way through the meaning of—and means of assuring—reproductive and sexual rights. In an effort to cut through this quagmire, the authors introduce a new concept of “enabling conditions” and the “social” as opposed to “individual” rights through which they could be realized. These, in brief, refer to the “social changes necessary to eliminate poverty and empower women” (p. 109; emphasis in original). Addressing enabling conditions would also open up the “private” sphere within
which much abuse of women takes place and in which it is hard to afford them protection in law or rights. The magnitude of this agenda does not escape the authors; they believe, however, following Williams (1991), that the shift from individual to social rights would also shift the “major burden of correlative duties from individuals to public agencies” (p. 110).

Space does not permit individual discussion of the remaining contributions to the book. These include a chapter by Reed Boland, Sudhakar Rao, and George Zeidenstein on human rights in international documents and one by Srilatha Batliwala on the meaning of empowerment. Sonalde Desai analyzes the increasing burdens faced by women as health and development projects multiply; Simeen Mahmud and Anne Johnston review the literature that relates women’s status and empowerment to reproductive outcomes; and Alayne Adams and Sarah Castle review the West African literature on gender relations and household dynamics. Five chapters on reproductive and sexual health services conclude the book, dealing with the expansion of access and quality, by Iain Aitken and Laura Reichenbach; the evaluation of reproductive health programs, by Anrudh Jain and Judith Bruce; adolescent programs, by Kirstan Hawkins and Bayeligne Meshesa; women-centered research, by Mahmoud Fathalla; and financing reproductive and sexual health services, by Jennifer Zeitlin, Ramesh Govindaraj, and Lincoln Chen.

While there are many ideas and much that is of interest in Population Policies Reconsidered, flaws of both style and substance may also be cited. For example, the volume as a whole sets up an overly sharp distinction between “population controllers”—seemingly the entire establishment of population policymakers, demographers, and family planning professionals—and “feminists.” The first group is said to be interested solely in population numbers, while the latter group has individuals and human needs in mind. Similarly, traditional family planning programs are characterized in virtually every chapter as “centralized, authoritarian and coercive,” clearly an exaggerated stereotype. Curiously, the contributors appear to be unaware of the contradiction between their denunciation of centralized and authoritarian family planning programs and the highly statist prescriptions for government intervention that emerge in many of the chapters. The setting up of a bogeyman may be helpful in attracting popular support for radical new ideas; its effect on the population professionals with whom women’s groups will continue to have to negotiate remains to be seen. The tactic might fit more neatly within a political tract than a scholarly work, and its presence here may be another manifestation of the uncomfortable relationship between scholars and activists among the contributors, and of confusion about the volume’s primary audience.

The emphasis on the demand side is welcome but runs into the problem of over-inclusiveness. Taken individually, it is difficult to quarrel with any of the goals laid out in this volume. Better health for women and children, women’s rights, more justice and equality, less poverty, better social, sanitary, and transportation infrastructure, education in sexuality, and reproductive health programs for men would figure on anyone’s list of desirable ends. Taken together, the prescriptions for population policy in this book would encompass everything that governments do. In this sense, while the authors are clearly masters of Western-style interest-group politics, the volume lacks an understanding of public administration and policymaking, bureaucratic politics, and institutional relations. The case for broad-
ening family planning programs might have come through more clearly had the editors been more ruthless in eliminating the less central contributions. Perhaps, however, they chose deliberately to cast their net too widely in the hope of making more limited gains at Cairo and beyond. We await with interest the ICPD and the 1995 United Nations Conference on Women.

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Reference


LAURIE ANN MAZUR (ED.)

*Beyond the Numbers: A Reader on Population, Consumption, and the Environment*


This reader brings together some 40 short articles, all of recent vintage and most of them reprinted from other sources, by academics, think-tank researchers, and officials of foundations and international agencies. The editor, Laurie Ann Mazur, is identified as “an independent writer and consultant to nonprofit organizations.” The occasion appears to be the UN’s 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, to be held in Cairo; the intended audience, those with an interest in the bases and directions of population policy.

This is not, however, a conventional reader. It has a message: to describe what Mazur calls “an emerging consensus” about population issues and population policy. In a foreword, Timothy E. Wirth, a senior US State Department official, asserts that “The new consensus forms the cornerstone of the Clinton administration’s population policy” (p. xv). This volume, he adds, contains “essays by many of the architects of the new thinking on population and environment issues” (p. xvi). Clearly, it should be a reviewer’s main task to take note of and critically assess this declared consensus.

What is the new thinking? It touches on many topics: the environment and sustainable development, reproductive health and rights, gender and culture, population and religion, urbanization and international migration, even national security. Fortunately, the editor’s lucid introduction and overview gives a helpful distillation of its content. The policy consensus is summarized in the form of “elements of a solution” to the interrelated global problems of population, poverty, and the environment. Eight elements are identified, as follows (pp. 15–19): satisfy the unmet need for contraception; improve the quality of reproductive health care and family planning services; improve child survival; increase access to education, especially for girls; expand life choices for young women; improve the status of women; re-