

Gender equality and inequality in rural India: Blessed with a son

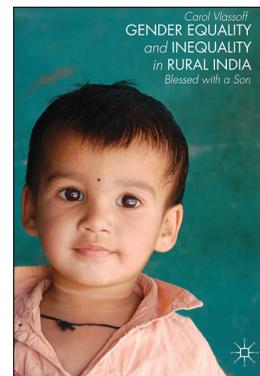
Carol Vlassoff

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The book begins with a beautiful quote by Rabindranath Tagore, “*The traveller has to knock at every alien door to come to his own, and one has to wander through all the outer worlds to reach the innermost shrine at the end.*”

Reading further, the reader soon realizes that the author has walked the talk.

Carol Vlassoff first visited India at the age of 27 years. Her first visit to the country in 1971 was not a very pleasant experience as it was during the Indo — Pak war and people were suspicious of foreigners, sometimes even mistaking her and her companion for Pakistan nationals.

However, her interest in exploring the cultural reasons for the high fertility in developing countries resulted in her securing a scholarship (from the Shastri Indo — Canadian Institute) to pursue her PhD studies at the University of Poona (now Pune), which she completed in the year 1978. The topic for her PhD thesis concerned cultural traditions and their influence on family planning among rural Indian women in a village called Gove in Satara district of Maharashtra, India.

Subsequently, she moved on, pursuing her career in international development. However, ever since she completed her PhD thesis, she envisioned the feasibility of carrying out another study in Gove, exploring how the process of modernization and social transition influenced fertility and gender issues. The opportunity presented itself while she was working with the World Health Organization (WHO). She secured funding from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) to carry out a resurvey of Gove in the year 1987.

She did yet another and final study of the same village in 2007-2008, for which she was funded by the Swiss Tropical Institute (now Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute) and Health Canada.

These studies, focusing on gender issues and son preference, carried out over a period of three decades, form the theme of this book. Vlassoff tries to capture how the social and economic changes in rural India have affected women’s empowerment and son preference.

The book would be of interest to social scientists, health planners, policy makers and field workers in social sciences and public health. The methodology of the field work such as house to house surveys and interview techniques described in some detail would be particularly inspiring to students of social sciences and community medicine. As mentioned earlier, she has walked the talk. During the surveys for her research, she stayed in the village, learned cooking Indian food (including making *chappatis*) and made herself at home with the local village population. It would be difficult to cite a better example of the participatory approach in qualitative research methods for students of social sciences and community medicine. She has supplemented her in-depth qualitative studies with quantitative data analysis wherever applicable.

The scope of the book is vast. Besides the main theme such as gender issues and fertility, she has studied the wider issues such as agricultural practices, land use and availability and resultant economic changes over the three decades. She has elegantly illustrated how these wider issues have an impact on gender equality and family size. She has employed improvised measures for women’s empowerment such as the simple decision involving “choosing a *sari* for self” to their freedom to visit the nearby town on their own. This indicates the deep insight gained by the author in local customs and gender issues, as these measures are culture specific and perhaps may not be well appreciated by someone growing up in a Western culture (including many urban Indians), where these things are taken for granted.

Her study has brought out that, over the decades, school enrolment of girls improved, as also their performance, which surpassed that of the boys'. With better education of girls, age of marriage also increased, as also a preference for smaller families and more acceptance of contraception practices.

The study also demonstrates that women employed in white collar jobs tended to marry later, made more use of modern contraception and delayed having their first child longer than unemployed women with the same amount of schooling.

In spite of these positive changes in the status of women, the underlying son preference is a challenge yet to be conquered as it has deeper cultural and emotional roots, as stated by the author in her book.

The price of the hardcover edition of the book, which is about 100 dollars, is perhaps beyond the reach of many students of social sciences and community medicine (not very lucrative disciplines). However, the book is recommended as an essential asset for libraries in institutions

of social sciences and medical schools. We hope that an affordable Asian edition is available soon.

Dr. Amitav Banerjee

Department of Community Medicine, Padmashree Dr. D Y Patil Medical College, Hospital and Research Centre, Dr. D Y Patil Vidyapeeth, Pune, India

Address for correspondence:

Prof Amitav Banerjee, Department of Community Medicine,
Padmashree Dr D Y Patil Medical College,
Hospital and Research Centre, Pimpri, Pune, India.
E-mail: amitavb@gmail.com

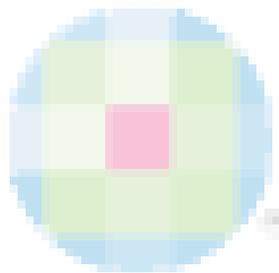
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