

Gender equality and inequality in rural India

Carol Vlassoff
University of Ottawa, Canada

Abstract:

Economic prosperity has not reduced the preference for sons in rural India. That's the key finding of my new book, "Gender Equality and Inequality in Rural India: Blessed with a Son" (Palgrave Macmillan) <http://us.macmillan.com/genderequalityandinequalityinruralindia/CarolVlassoff> that explores the intersection of longstanding cultural norms, socioeconomic context, and a rising India. Spanning over thirty years, my research combined survey and ethnographic methods to study change in the village of Gove, Satara District, Maharashtra. Economic progress in Gove reflected national trends, including electrification, irrigation and improved communications. Social advances were also seen in improved sanitation and the construction of a full primary health centre nearby. A high school was built, attracting teachers and students from outside the village. Between 1975 and 2008 female education increased considerably. Marriage age also increased and the average number of children per family declined from 5.6 to 2.8. Family planning, mainly female sterilization, facilitated this lower fertility. Fewer women had to work as wage labourers and, with smaller families, they had more free time. However, despite these improvements, traditional gender roles prevailed. For example, only 7% of married women worked in 'white-collar jobs' such as teachers and office workers. Interestingly, these women made more use of modern contraceptives and delayed having their first child longer than unemployed women with the same amount of schooling. Although couples now wanted only one or two children, they still felt compelled to have a son. Despite the persistence of son preference, the study identified promising areas for changes in rural women's position, including incentives for rural women's employment in the modern labour force and stricter enforcement of existing legislation to promote gender equality. The success demonstrated by India's family planning program shows that India can achieve this challenge if it commits itself seriously to this endeavour.

Speaker's profile:

Dr. Carol Vlassoff, Adjunct Professor in the Department of Epidemiology and Community Medicine, University of Ottawa, Canada, worked for 17 years with the World Health Organization (WHO). She has also held key posts in the International Development Research Centre, Canada and in the Canadian International Development Agency. Dr. Vlassoff has a PhD in Economics from the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, University of Pune, where she studied in the 1970s. The topic for her thesis concerned cultural tradition and fertility behaviour among rural Indian women. In 1987

and 2007-2008 she returned to the rural area, where she conducted her PhD research to complete a longitudinal study of the community, Gove. Her recently completed book is about this study, and is entitled, *Gender Equality and Inequality in Rural India. Blessed with a Son*.

Dr. Vlassoff is a Canadian citizen and has authored more than 65 peer reviewed scientific publications.