Chapter 13

Female Education in a Sedentary Ariaal Rendille Community

Paternal Decision-Making and Biosocial Pathways

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1. INTRODUCTION

The noted Australian demographer John Caldwell’s (1979) seminal analysis of Nigerian survey data revealed that maternal education influenced offspring mortality more than father’s income. This finding sparked over twenty years of demographic concern with female education in Third World populations. Caldwell (1980, 1982) went on to make female education a cornerstone of his emerging “Wealth Flows Theory”, while subsequent World Fertility Survey and Demographic Health Survey Data consistently included female education as an important descriptive and analytical variable. Both sets of international surveys revealed strong negative associations between maternal education and high levels of infant/child mortality and fertility across a set of world-wide cultures (for reviews see Bledsoe et al., 1999; Cleland and Kaufmann, 1998; Cleland and Van Ginneken, 1989; United Nations, 1995). Largely as a result of these findings, the International Conference on Population and Development meeting in Cairo in 1994 strongly called for universal female access to education because:

increase in the education of women and girls contributes to greater empowerment of women, to a postponement of the age of marriage, and to a reduction in the size of families (United Nations, 1994: Ch. XI, Para. 11.3)
Despite this long and intensive interest in the strong causal relationship between female education and demographic change, problems remain in delineating actual pathways connecting girls’ schooling and demographic parameters. Levine et al. (1994: 304) honestly describe the current situation by saying:

Among the least understood processes are those that mediate the effects of school experience during childhood on the behaviour of adult women as mothers and reproductive decision-makers in Third World countries. This is the “black box” in survey data linking years spent in school with demographic and health outcomes; it is often covered by speculative assumptions and interpretations, but rarely investigated.

Since 1990, one of us (Roth) has investigated two related aspects of female education among Rendille and Ariaal populations of Marsabit District, northern Kenya. The first is how parents choose which children to send to school (Roth, 1991). The second concerns the search for pathways linking female education to fertility and morbidity (Roth et al., 2001). In this chapter we update and link these two research questions by focusing on recent work in the Ariaal Rendille village of Karare. Since this volume already contains broad cultural, economic and ecological descriptions of both Rendille and Ariaal populations we begin by focusing on our two specific research problems. An overview of the study setting, an introduction to our methodological approaches and analyses of recently collected data follow this.

2. RESEARCH ISSUES

2.1. Parental Decision-Making and Female Education

In a 1991 paper entitled, “Education, tradition and household labor among Rendille pastoralists”, Roth examined survey data from the sedentary lowland community of Korr to delineate possible Rendille parental decision-making patterns of child selection to attend school. Despite Caldwell’s initial recognition of the demographic importance of female education, the topic of parental decision-making is strangely lacking in the formulation of his subsequent Wealth Flows Theory. Regarding this subject he says only,

One other factor little mentioned in research reports but frequently mentioned in the villages is the view that not all children are sufficiently gifted to give an adequate return on educational investment or to achieve sufficient success to provide their parents with a channel to the modern world. It is very much of a lucky dip. (Caldwell, 1982: 44)

Rather than constituting just “a lucky dip” Roth proposed that cultural factors molded parental decision-making. Noting that Rendille society features patrilineality, patrilocality, and primogeniture, that wealth is measured in livestock, and the primary unit of production is the household labor force, he predicted that latter-born boys from poor families are most likely chosen for schooling. In contrast, first-born sons are too valuable to remove from the family labor pool, since they inherit the entire household herd upon the death of the male household head, while in wealthy households large family herds necessitates labor from all sons. Daughters would not be selected for schooling often; because of patrilocality and patrilineality daughters leave the natal household labor pool upon marriage and their subsequent labor, and that of their children, belongs to their husband’s lineage. Under these conditions, and given the early entry into and substantial contribution of females to the Rendille household labor force (Fratkin and Smith, 1995; Smith, 1999), it would make little economic sense to educate daughters.