9 The Role of the Demographic Variable

9.1 INTRODUCTION

The findings of the previous chapters suggest that the demographic variables play an essential role in defining the different poverty groups (see Chapter 6) and, consequently, in the dynamics of poverty as described in Chapter 7.

This study, however, is not the first to report such findings. The role of demographic factors in poverty has been discussed quite extensively in the literature. Orshansky (1965),

\[1\] Ritchey (1974) and others, have pointed out the large number of old people, children and unstable families among the poor. The incidence of poverty is even higher among individuals or households characterized by more than one of these particular predisposing factors, i.e. members of a racial minority who are old or uneducated, females who are heads of household, in particular with children, etc.

This empirical evidence may suggest not mere correlation but causality which may suggest at least two plausible explanations. It may be that individuals with the above demographic characteristics will tend to be poor, or it may be that institutional barriers affecting these individuals, such as access to markets, discrimination, etc., push them into poverty.

This ambiguity appears in the literature as the ‘flawed character’ versus equality of opportunities. The first argument blames poverty on the individuals themselves. It claims that individuals have full control of their socio-economic status and if they fail it is their own fault. Failure in school is through lack of motivation and failure in the job market is a result of unfavourable attitudes towards work as well as a continuation of the failure at school. Jobs are available, but these individuals do not want to work. Thus poverty is a result of the lack of ‘motivation’, ‘work ethic’, etc.

This view is quite often advocated by the middle class, since it
implies that the non-poor are such because of a non 'flawed character'. As Walinsky (1965) pointed out, ego satisfaction requires each of us to ascribe the status of 'those above us' to luck and of 'those below us' to character and ability.

The 'flawed character' argument also helps to ease society's conscience about helping the poor. The argument implies that there are enough opportunities for the poor already and if they do not use them it is because of their character. Thus there is no need for additional public expenditure to help the poor.

As many authors suggest, the 'flawed character' is related to the demographic characteristics of the poor. In particular, some argue that black individuals are so genetically or culturally handicapped that they cannot acquire enough human capital; others argue that the chicanos are lazy and will never get anywhere. Similar arguments arise in regard to sex (women are not as clever as men, etc.), socio-economic status (culture of poverty arguments), and other demographic characteristics.

The alternative to the 'flawed character' theory is the restricted opportunities argument. According to this argument, the poor are poor because they have limited access to education, to labour markets and to credit markets. They do not enjoy the same opportunities and government help as other groups in the population. Poverty is not a question of 'work ethic' or 'motivation' since the poor do not have the chance to demonstrate such characteristics because of institutional barriers. These socially imposed constraints are the cause of poverty.

Unequal opportunities, sometimes referred to in the literature as discrimination, quite often affect minority groups. Such a discrimination can be on the basis of race, sex, age or socio-economic background in different aspects of life – schools, labour market, contact with institutions, access to capital and labour markets, etc. As long as such institutional barriers remain, poverty may persist for such groups even if they acquire better human capital. When it is combined with other predisposing demographic variables, it is quite likely to result in poverty.

According to this argument, the poor are innocent and not responsible for their situation. Society is to blame and it is society's duty to improve access to quality education, jobs, and credit markets in order to allow the poor to have equal opportunities.

The answer to this debate is fundamental to the question of whether poverty is reversible or not. The 'flawed character' argument...