



## FEMALE LIFE EXPECTANCY, GENDER STRATIFICATION, HEALTH STATUS, AND LEVEL OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: A CROSS-NATIONAL STUDY OF LESS DEVELOPED COUNTRIES

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**Abstract**—A number of studies have attempted to account for cross-national differences in life expectancy, but relatively few have focused on female life expectancy, and even fewer on the relevance of predictors linked to gender stratification theory. The present study seeks to assess the utility of gender stratification theory in accounting for cross-national differences in female life expectancy in less developed countries. An incremental model building strategy is used to develop a final model that combines predictors linked to both industrialism theory and gender stratification theory. The analysis is based on multiple regression and cross-sectional samples that vary in size from 40 to 97 countries. Evidence is presented that several aspects of women's status have a positive effect on female life expectancy. Indicators of women's educational status, women's economic status, and women's reproductive autonomy all prove to be important predictors of female life expectancy. Analysis of interaction effects suggests that the strength of the effects of some aspects of women's economic status and the effect of some aspects of health status on female life expectancy vary with the level of economic development. A comprehensive assessment of the relative strength of alternative measures of women's education is carried out, and evidence is presented that it does make a difference how the level of women's education is measured. © 1997 Elsevier Science Ltd

*Key words*—life expectancy, mortality, women's status, education, gender inequality

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years many studies have attempted to account for cross-national differences in life expectancy. Most focus on a measure that averages the results for both genders (Lena and London, 1995; Hertz *et al.*, 1994; Rogers and Wofford, 1989; Pendleton and Yang, 1985; Rodgers, 1979). However, even those that attempt to account for differences in female life expectancy generally emphasize predictors linked to industrialism theory to the exclusion of those linked to gender stratification theory (Kattler and Williamson, 1988; Manton, 1984; Preston, 1975). Studies that make an effort to consider predictors linked to gender stratification theory, with few exceptions (Hunter, 1990), consider only one dimension of gender stratification, female education (Murray, 1987). No prior studies provide a detailed assessment of the relative importance of different dimensions of female education, nor do any such studies present detailed assessments of the relevance of a range of different dimensions of women's status.

In the present study we assess the impact of several different dimensions of women's status on female life expectancy using models that combine variables derived from industrialism theory with variables derived from a gender stratification perspective. In our analysis of the relevance of female

education we consider a variety of different ways to operationalize the concept and find important differences in results depending on which alternative is selected. Because we view women's status as multidimensional, we also consider a number of dimensions of women's status other than women's education, the most commonly used indicator of women's status.

### THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

#### *Industrialism theory*

Many prior studies have emphasized predictors and explanations linked to industrialism theory. This theory specifies that the transition from a lower level of development to a higher level of development will be achieved when a country undergoes a number of structural changes linked to the process of industrialization (Wilensky, 1975; Wilensky and Lebeaux, 1965; Kerr *et al.*, 1960). A higher level of economic development leads to an improved standard of living with better nutrition and advanced medical technology. Studies in this tradition commonly use variables such as percent urban, school enrollment (or some other education measure), and GDP per capita (Tolnay and Christenson, 1984; Brazzell and Gillespie, 1981; Van de Walle and Knodel, 1980). Theorists con-

cerned with the status of women have been critical of much of the work in this theoretical tradition as it often omits any analysis of male/female differences with respect to either the causes or the consequences of industrialization and economic development (Boserup, 1970; Ward, 1984; Hartmann, 1995).

#### *Gender stratification theory*

Theorists in the gender stratification theory tradition attempt to account for differences in privilege and power in society that are linked to inequality based on gender. Stratification based on gender shares some of the characteristics of other dimensions of inequality such as those based on class, caste and ethnicity. Gender stratification theorists point out that it is important to distinguish between measures of women's absolute status (such as female secondary school enrollment rate) and relative status (such as ratio of female to male secondary school enrollment rate). The relative status of women, the status women hold in comparison to men, is at the core of gender stratification theory (Mason, 1986). Although many dimensions of women's status and autonomy have been proposed in prior studies, it is possible, without doing too great an injustice to the literature, to group the various indicators into four broad categories: (1) women's educational status, (2) women's political status, (3) women's economic status and (4) women's autonomy and independence. Each of these four areas are sites of construction and reconstruction of gender inequality in society. In the present study we consider indicators of women's status linked to each of these spheres.

Blumberg (1984) argues that women's economic power is the strongest predictor of women's overall

status. Prior research has established that the process of economic development has a profound impact on the economic status of women. In the less developed countries (LDCs) women often have less access than men to new economic resources as they become available in connection with the process of economic development. At the same time women often lose their traditional sources of economic subsistence (Ward, 1983; Hartmann, 1995). Furthermore, recent studies suggest that the debt crisis in many LDCs often forces the government to implement structural adjustment policies which have different effects on women than on men (Sparr, 1994; Dalla Costa and Dalla Costa, 1995).

Caldwell's (1979) finding that mother's education is the single most important determinant of child survival has informed many studies of mortality and life expectancy. Caldwell (1979, 1986, 1993) suggests three reasons for the link. (1) With increasing education there tend to be changes in family roles giving women greater say with respect to the care of their children. (2) A more educated mother tends to be less fatalistic about her sick child. She tends to be more prone to seek medical treatment and more prone to make use of modern medical facilities. (3) More highly educated mothers are generally in a better position to demand the attention of health providers and more likely to ask for explanations as to the cause of a medical problem and what can be done to prevent it. Gender stratification theory suggests that such behavior would be even more likely in countries in which women have more autonomy, more political influence, and greater control over economic resources. Women who are in a position to control their reproductive lives, women who have access to good jobs, and women who have more autonomy and independence in the family, community, and nation are likely to live longer than women who are less empowered in these respects.

While the empirical literature links the absolute level of women's education to life expectancy and other measures of mortality, based on gender stratification theory there are theoretical reasons to believe that women's *relative* status as measured by the amount of education women have relative to the amount men have should also be an important predictor. As there tends to be a high correlation between women's and men's absolute education levels, evidence that a relative measure is an important predictor of female life expectancy would offer stronger support for the gender stratification perspective than would evidence pointing to the importance of the corresponding absolute measure.

#### METHODS

The sample for the present study is limited to the LDCs; it excludes the developed nations.\* We have excluded the developed nations because we believe

\*The 97 countries in our sample can be grouped into the following five regions: (1) sub-Saharan Africa: Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe; (2) East Asia, South Asia and Pacific: Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Indonesia, Korea South Republic, Laos, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand; (3) Europe and Central Asia: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Estonia, Georgia, Greece, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan; (4) Middle East and North Africa: Algeria, Egypt Arabian Republic, Iran Islamic Republic, Jordan, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia; and (5) Americas: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Puerto Rico, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay, Venezuela.

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