The interrelationships between female autonomy, empowerment and demographic change:

Some unexpected pointers from history

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The demography of the contemporary world has in recent years been greatly enriched by lessons drawn from the experience of the past. The substantive findings on the determinants and consequence of demographic behavior in the past, as well as the methodological tools of historical demography in particular and history in general, have both had much to offer to the demographer trying to understand the developing countries of today.

But there is one branch of research on the demography of contemporary societies that is conspicuously missing in historical demography. This is the analysis of interrelations between gender and demographic behavior. It is true that the huge amount of research and writing on gender relations and demographic change in the developing countries is driven primarily by the practical imperative of wanting to hasten the demographic transition in this part of the word, and to hasten it through strategies that are politically correct – it makes much more ethical and political sense to call for greater investments in women's education and employment to reduce fertility and child mortality that it does to promote stringent family planning policy even if that too reduces fertility and child mortality.

In any case, whatever the underlying motives for this brand of research, it is still true that we now know with a fair amount of certainty that gender 'equality' (as defined in very specific ways of course) is associated with better (that is, lower) fertility and mortality outcomes and that

the intervening mechanisms for this relationship have much to do with more efficient 'mothering', defined in a number of ways.

The literature on the maternal education-child survival relationship in developing countries is a particularly rich source of theoretical advancements on this subject. This relation is linear in a universal way that is almost boring – for every additional year of education, there seems to be a rise in child survival probabilities. Much effort has gone into understanding why this is so and the general consensus is that it has something to do with several aspects of women's status that are related to the education variable – their greater knowledge of good child-care, their greater self-confidence (which allows them to stand up to husbands and mothers-in-law who think the old ways are better), their ability to recognize the first signs of trouble and their willingness and ability to act on this recognition , usually with 'modern' health care.

In the demographer's shorthand, these attributes of the educated mother tend to get classified under the general category of female 'autonomy'; the educated mother, it is postulated, is a more autonomous person. She has control over her own life and her own doings and she uses both these forms of control for greater family welfare (witness also, for example, the literature that concludes that additional family income is more likely to be spent on children when that income is earned by the woman than when it is earned by her husband).

However, there is an anomaly here. The autonomous mother is always portrayed in this literature as an altruistic mother. Her education and her income seem to give her the freedom to now think of others and do for others; indeed one could twist the tale around and wonder if this should be called autonomy at all. Would not 'responsibility' be a better word to describe the doings of this educated woman?

In other words, below this statistical finding of a uniformly positive relationship between maternal education and child survival and the quantitative and qualitative attempts in the literature to identify some of the mediating variables, there is an underlying story of *ideological change* which is not being probed explicitly.

On the other hand, the historical literature on *social* (as opposed to demographic) change in the developed world in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has much to say about the changing ideology of the family at this time. Much of this literature is centered around the changing emphasis on the mother. At one level, this change in emphasis is of a positive kind – it idealizes the mother, it glorifies her attributes. But in the process, it also makes a martyr of her. And it has no patience for the 'irresponsible' mother, the mother whose central concern is not the welfare of her husband and her children. Parallel to this, is a changing ideological conception of the child, as a creature to be nurtured, not abandoned, not wet-nursed, not fostered out, not apprenticed out. Put these two changing streams of ideology together and you come up with a far from straightforward conclusion of the changing status of women with the Industrial Revolution.

Historians are not particularly interested in examining some of the demographic implications of this changing ideology. But a demographer interested in the timing of falls in infant and child mortality in the developed world, especially among what may be called the 'elite' groups in society, cannot but be struck by the analogy that can be drawn with the contemporary literature on the role of women's agency in better family health and survival.

It is therefore surprising that most of the historical demography literature on changing mortality is almost entirely focussed on factors such as declines in epidemics, improvements in economic status and therefore in nutrition (and, consequently, declines in infectious diseases like

tuberculosis), improvements in sanitation and public health programs, a few (and slow) developments in medicine, and better knowledge and practice of household hygiene.

Changing household practices that have been considered in the literature include breastfeeding patterns, care in the preparation and storage of food, more frequent washing of bodies and changing of undergarments, the increased use of soap, and other such things. Take these changes together with the changes in the ideology of family life and one is forced to conclude that by the beginning of the nineteenth century and certainly by its end, women must have been strongly implicated in the declines in infant and child mortality that characterize this period and that account for the bulk of the rise in life expectancies during this period.

In this paper, I try to juxtapose evidence of changes in women's autonomy (in the process, I pay some attention to redefining words like autonomy and empowerment) in the industrialized countries when they were, so to speak, 'developing' countries, with changes in infant and child mortality and health to look for connections between changes in female empowerment and improved child survival. My preliminary research suggests that if anything, it was social change which increased the constraints on women's lives that went alongside (and probably contributed to) better child survival.

I then extrapolate this thread of analysis to ask whether the link between female education and child mortality (or even the link between our standard measure of female autonomy and child health) should be interpreted to imply a relation between increasing empowerment and declining mortality and fertility or instead one between *decreasing* empowerment and declining mortality and fertility.