Demography and gender

Irene Mariam Tazi-Preve
Department of Political Science, University of Vienna, Austria

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INTRODUCTION

The gender order of most cultures is structured to the disadvantage of women. If gender is the socially imposed division between the sexes (Tuttle 1987:123), then inclusions and exclusions on the basis of sex are to be found in all areas of society. These unequal conditions become visible in the in political and economic participation, in access to resources, and in the division of work in the private as well as in the public realms. Thus fertility research must also deal with issues such as the gender-specific division of work in the private domain and the social and political power structures in which the mother-child or mother-father-child relationship is embedded.

This paper is divided into two main parts, based around two perspectives from which demography and gender can be viewed. The first part outlines theoretical feminist approaches that examine gender relations from different perspectives, since within theoretical discussion the discourse on motherhood and fertility differs greatly. The second concerns a feminist epistemology of demography, by questioning the presuppositions underlying the scientific production of knowledge of the fertility transition.

FEMINIST THEORIES

There are several important theoretical approaches within feminist theory to show how the topics of fertility and motherhood are dealt with within women's studies. These include:

- Theory of equality
- Theories of difference
- Marxism and Socialist Feminism
- Postmodern feminism and gender approaches
- Gender as a political system
- Gender mainstreaming
Theory of equality

The 'Theory of Equality' can be traced back to the beginnings of the new Women's Movement in the 1970's, influenced by the work of writers such as Simone de Beauvoir (1968) and Betty Friedan (1963). de Beauvoir's premise was the concept of the 'mother trap', by which motherhood negatively affects the entire life course of a woman, since as a mother she can never achieve creativity in the public realm, which thus is left to men alone. With the public sphere dominated by males, the private area was a subject of investigation, and the slogan 'The private is political' was coined. The imbalance of power within the family, with the female responsible for the household and children, was seen to be a central aspect of inequality. Not biology, but rather society and its valuations were seen as the root of discrimination. Liberation from repressive circumstances was postulated as a major goal.

According to the tenets of 'liberal feminism', if women were involved in all areas of society in equal number and ways as men, equality would be achieved. A logical extension is that equality can only be achieved by childless women. It has been suggested that nowadays women have the same opportunities as men, yet this is only true of a few selected areas conceded by men (Mulack 1990).

The access of women as 'equals' in the public realm implies the exclusion of female living conditions, which is characterized by the fact of their (potential) motherhood. Actual differences between 'citizens' are not taken into account. When they are treated 'equally', women are treated as men.

According to Gómez (2002), equity is not the same as equality and not all inequality can be considered inequitable. While equality is an empirical concept, equity is an ethical imperative grounded in principles of social justice and human rights. Thus, aiming for 'equity' goes far beyond simple equal opportunity concepts, taking into account the varying needs of men and women.

Theories of difference

The positions within this theoretical direction basically assume that underlying structures must be questioned to create a society that caters to the needs of both sexes. Included within this diverse theoretical approach are feminist psychoanalysts from France and Italy, who are critical of the findings of developmental psychologists such as Freud and Lacan regarding the formation of gendered identity. The feminists focus upon the differences between men and women, whereby relying heavily upon the fact that it is women who bear children.

The philosopher and psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray (1991) is amongst the most important figures of the Theory of Difference. Her main thesis is that the demand for equality of the races and sexes disregards very real and existing differences. Therefore, she calls for an increased awareness of the differences between sexes and the development of an independent female order that integrates woman-specific aspects. From the perspective of difference, motherhood is not seen as an obstacle
to the definitive liberation of woman, but rather as a special and unique female potential. The Italian Luisa Muraro (1993) is especially concerned with 'giving women their dignity, their voice, back'. In its reflections on a sexually differentiated culture, the Diotima group (1989) showed that our societal order is based upon the relationship between men, and characterized by collective male initiation rituals.

With her thesis of the 'mothering' behaviour of women, Chodorow (1986) departed from the fact that in our contemporary society it is the women who care for the children, especially in the early phases of childhood. The individualization of the child is in itself already very different, because mothers release their daughters quite reluctantly, while sons are perceived as the sexually other and are pushed into independence. Since a boy ceases to identify with his mother, the distinct individualism of men is created, with men finding it difficult to care emotionally and practically for others.

### Marxist and socialist feminism

Theorists who adopt the socialist and Marxist approaches (see Hartsock 1983; Neususs 1985) hold the view that equal rights between the sexes is not possible in a capitalist society. They particularly criticized capitalistic conditions of production and the distribution of work, as to a great extent men maintain control over the work force of women. In addition, women are largely responsible for the unpaid work of reproduction (housework, child care, providing for the family, care of the elderly and ill) due to the roles attributed to them. In Marxist approaches, the distribution of work on the basis of sex is seen as a central factor of oppression. Thus, there is no conceptual separation of the public and private domain. Instead, gender is interpreted as a category that plays a central role in the distribution of power within society (Krause 2003).

This academically constructed hierarchical separation between production and reproduction has been widely criticized by feminists. By defining 'reproduction' as supplementing the necessities of the economy, women themselves are seen as the 'means of reproduction', being transformed into objects practically borrowed from nature. In her in-depth study of the childcare activities of mothers, Neususs (1985) is critical of Marx for not taking this into account.

### Postmodern feminism and gender approaches

Gender theorists, of whom Judith Butler (1990) is one of the most well known proponents, identify the difference between the sexes as a historically and socially constructed duality. Their assumption is that as the fact of being a woman is historically associated with social discrimination, the status of being a 'neutral' human being would guarantee women an escape from stereotypes caused by their sex. Gender theorists believe that the difference between the sexes is, in the end, a product of men, with the intention of the subjection of women.
Postmodern theoreticians, who criticize the postulate of heterosexuality, believe that the separation of sex and gender contributes towards maintaining a hierarchical order of the sexes based on exclusion. They point out that social gender must not necessarily be identical to biological sex. The destabilization of the sex / gender construct increasingly makes the idea of a homogeneous group 'woman' or 'man' appear untenable.

**Gender as a political system**

For the supporters of this critical approach, gender is a political condition. MacKinnon (1989) defines gender as a social system that distributes power, therefore making it a political system. Thus gender is not only a social category, but also an expression of power relationships that become visible, for example, through hierarchical positioning within the working world. Gender is furthermore part of the political system because the politically and also scientifically defined separation of the public and the private spheres is gendered. Political action and the structures of political institutions on the one hand stem from the prevailing gender order, while on the other, politics itself has a decisive influence upon gender relations.

Within this approach, it again is primarily the reproductive sector that is perceived as the arena of unequal distribution of power. That women are largely responsible for the reproductive sector has a number of consequences for their access to social opportunities in life, as with unequal chances with regard to access, income, and career, etc.(Cyba 2000). Therefore, there are many forms of inequity, which also indicates that sex is a determining factor in the unevenly distributed opportunities in life.

Moreover, we must keep in mind that women's rising labour force participation does not necessarily mean that women's power and autonomy is increasing, either in the public sphere or in the private. So the reproductive area mostly remains a female domain. Thus in the private area the division of childcare and household duties can be called the 'pivotal point' of 'gender troubles'. Anne Phillips (1991) has speculated on family duties if the distinction between public and private spheres lost its gendered quality. Men and women would move equally between the responsibilities of household and employment, would share equally in bringing up children and caring for parents, would vary as individuals rather than as sexes in their priorities or experience, and would be equally attracted to a political life.

**Gender mainsteaming**

In the 1970s and 1980s, activists of the New Women's Movement called for an autonomous women's politics, and *gender mainsteaming* was established itself. The European Union is an especially active proponent of GM. The United Nations, the Council of Europe, and the European Union take on gender mainsteaming as a fundamental policy development method for achieving gender equality. GM expanded when it became clear that diverse disadvantages arise from the way social
norms are established: in a male dominated society, norms are frequently constructed with the purpose of supporting men, and through the concept of 'sameness' these were transferred to women. In its declared definitions, GM underlines that appropriate measures must not be directed exclusively at women, that is, that sex-specific consequences are not only to be taken into account for issues where women are explicitly involved, but that the gender dimension be integrated into all levels of policy making. In politics, GM measures should not be relegated to 'Women Departments', but are to be implemented in a wired range of departments.

This concept has already been widely criticized. Firstly, it is feared that GM, by its definitions and programs to date, could be an arbitrary catalogue of instruments emptied of content and without clear goals (Krause 2003). Furthermore, the fact that the term was first coined by women's groups concerned with development aid has practically been forgotten, and the term 'feminism' has disappeared from its deliberations. Finally, many are afraid that GM will put an end to the implementation of parity-promoting measures.

DEMOGRAPHIC THEORIES

Gender in demography

Epistemology (the theory or science of the method or grounds of knowledge) approaches question the scientific concept of objectivity, since, according to feminist presuppositions, science can never be neutral because it is pursued by humans, whose interests, personal views, and values inevitably infiltrate their work. To enrich demographic discourse, it is also necessary to gain a critical view of the discipline, because demography (at least where fertility is concerned) tends to reduce very complex human activities to a handful of measurable phenomena. Three theories are considered below:

- Demographic transition theory
- The New Home economics
- Theory of individuality

Demographic transition theory and feminist research

Demographic transition theory (Davis 1963) was formulated in the 1950s and 1960s, proposing a three-stage transformation from high mortality and high fertility, through lower mortality with high fertility and, finally, to low mortality and low fertility. This theory attempted to place on a scientific footing a series of complex social changes incorporating not only political economy and changing consciousness. MacKinnon (1997) says that transition theory which imposes a falsely unitary universalism on a very disparate set of changing social relations.
Picking up the central theory within the macro-theoretical approach, the second demographic transition might be an example of a very generalizing view. It focuses on the ideational changes that lead to a restructuring of the value system as a consequence of lessening submission to rules set by traditional social norms and institutions (Lesthaeghe 1995). Even though van de Kaa (1987) mentioned the 'woman question' as one of the main reasons for the demographic changes of the last decades, he did not seek to analyse the women's movement since the late 1960's. He dealt neither with the reason for the movement nor with the consequences for society as a whole, nor with the variety of feminist theories. He merely touched upon the question by quoting some sentences within the debate on fertility decline, stressing much more the rights and self-fulfilment of individuals rather than the imbalance of power between the two sexes. This is true of many theorists dealing with demographic change.

The New Home Economics: ignorance of the gendered nature of 'fertility costs'

It is a widespread procedure in demography to take economic theories as explanatory models. Thus the declining birth-rate is frequently explained within the context of Human Capital Theory according to which individuals will always try to maximize their well-being (Becker 1985). Here, 'fertility [is] part of this optimization since a person derives utility not only from the consumption of goods and leisure but also from having children.'

The micro-economic approach initiated by Becker at the beginning of the 1960s contains the idea concerning a household unit that when income increases one would expect an increase in the number of children. 'New Home Economics' shows that a woman's decision to pursue a job depends on the following factors: her own salary as well as that of the spouse, the evaluation of household activities, the distribution of house work, as well as the existence and care of children.

Becker (1981) argued that women have a comparative advantage with respect to household and child care due to their sex-specific socialization, and that because of this they are generally more efficient in these tasks. A further argument is that mothers are essential 'natural carers' of the new-born and that women accumulate 'household capital' during the time of their parental leave while their human capital is reduced for the labour market, which again raises the comparative advantage of housework.

The number of children a couple has is limited by fertility costs and their preferred level of care and expenditures per child. These 'fertility costs' also include income losses during the time of career interruptions or due to a reduced extent of breadwinning activities when a child must be taken care of. In the traditional 'male breadwinner' model, such indirect fertility costs are almost negligible for the family because men were rarely involved in the direct care for children. As employment became increasingly appealing for women because it provided them with economic independence, the gendered nature of fertility costs therefore became a crucial issue in the dual-earner family context.
However, the New Home Economics is a theoretical viewpoint from the Industrial Era. Post-industrial society is undergoing fundamental changes. Amongst these are the loss of job security due to globalization and demographic changes including higher divorce rates, reduced fertility, increasing number of one-parent families, higher ages for marriage and the birth of the first child).

**Theory of Individuality: notions of egoism by women**

On the micro-theoretical level, certain theorists like Schmid (1984), Hoffmann-Nowotny (1987) or more recently McRae (1997) identify the tendency towards individualism within society as the underlying cause of low fertility. So in a way the area of privacy is widely accepted by society (just compare with the discussion concerning individuality, new forms of cohabitation etc.,), while concurrently the number of births has significant importance for society and politics as a whole. That means fertility always remains at the intersection of the private and the public area. Within the scenario of declining fertility, the private choice of women is interpreted as mere egoism, and they are attacked for their wishes for 'self-realization' and accused by the proponents of family policy of jeopardizing public stability.

**CRITIQUE**

The demography of birth rates has a tendency towards reducing very complex human activity to a measurable phenomenon in which women are ignored in a very fatal way as the ones who guarantee reproduction (MacKinnon 1997, Watkins 1993). In many demographic texts today, women often merely appear as variables, an approach that weakens a sense of active agency, of power or sexuality.

**Declining birth rates and contraceptive choice**

The dimension of 'gender' has been referred to only since the appearance of the phenomenon of fertility decline, and that with a focus upon the question why women are having less children. However, men's desire for offspring is declining, as shown in the German study by Dobritz et al.(2005). Thus, beyond being a 'woman's question', the topic also includes a 'relationship question'.

From the turn of the century, when all Western societies expressed concern at their declining birth rates, observers sought to comprehend the decline, some with an expressed aim of reversing it, others with a more scientifically detached purpose. On the other hand, the role of feminism does not appear to have been considered by most of the population scientists.

In her preference theory, Hakim (2003) laments that male demographers have tended to assume that motherhood is a natural, even biologically determined choice for women, and that the high levels of fertility seen in the past were 'normal'. They
have failed to recognize that sexually active heterosexual women for centuries had no direct control over their fertility, and thus had little choice about the shape of their lives prior to the introduction of modern methods of contraception. The contraceptive revolution gave women back the independent control of their fertility.

Assumptions on family and household

The cultural and economic concepts of population science have to be critically scrutinized by the category (‘male-citizen-wage-earner’) underlying demographic research (Neyer 2000). Many demographers still tend to speak of the family or household as an undifferentiated, harmonious unit. Easterlin and Crimmins (1985) maintained that women's aspirations are not very different from those of the past: to find a husband who can support them, to give birth to children and to be a good mother. In his view, the rise of women's participation in the workforce is entirely due to the need for dual incomes. He maintained that when relative earnings rise, marriage and birth rates will rise again and women will return to their primary tasks of homemaking and childrearing.

In her review of 30 years of articles in the journal *Demography*, Watkins (1993) highlighted assumptions about women's behaviour which underpin much of quantitative demographic work. She found that issues of power within the family are ignored almost completely. Watkins suggests that demographers should submit those assumptions to a critical scrutiny in keeping with the principles of women's studies. So basically it is necessary to understand the question of 'gender inequity' as an important category within population science. As the Watkins pointed out, power is a central issue for feminists, who seek to illuminate, not only the workings of political and economic power, but also previously neglected domains such as the differential distribution of power within the household.

Women's attainments of the last three decades in the public sphere have changed the expectations of a whole new generation of women, which is now facing the challenge of juggling employment and family responsibilities. But such changes have not been matched by equivalent changes in social expectations of women's responsibilities in the private sphere. So power is the central issue for a demographic research, by which not only the workings of political and economic power but also previously neglected domains, such as the differential distribution of power within households, are illuminated.

Anyhow, awareness among demographers has been growing that the traditional family model with its life-long marriage, definite segregation of gender roles, etc. forms rather an obstacle than a supportive environment for higher parity births. So, we must realize that 'the family is not a static, unchanging institution, a decision-making black box' (Folbre 1983). On the contrary, it is a group of individuals who make collective, but not necessarily consensual decisions.

The search of cause and effect has been the defining characteristic of disciplines such as demography, which track movements in population (MacKinnon 1997).
Social statistics aim at the presentation of supposedly incontrovertible statistical facts. Within its parameters, morality is supposed to be absent, but it lurks unacknowledged, in its categories, in the questions chosen for investigation.

**Political approaches**

Changes in fertility patterns or fertility behaviour are usually attributed to economic and cultural developments, not to political ones (Neyer 2000). Moreover, economic and cultural aspects are rarely embedded in a larger framework of economic and social systems, but are viewed mainly in the way in which they manifest themselves on the level of the individual.

All these approaches described above have major consequences for demographic analyses:

- They render the 'demographic individual' non-political.
- They downplay the interrelations between politics, economy, and social and cultural institutions.
- They limit the potential to envisage the 'demographic individual' as an active agent of social and political change.

**NEW CHALLENGES**

McDonald (2000) turns to several findings in women's studies and draws a parallel with the conclusions of demography, pointing out that 'gender' plays no central role as yet in the theories about demographic change. Within 'equity theory' McDonald argues that very low fertility is the product of the combination of high gender equity in individual-oriented institutions with the persistence of only moderate gender equity in family-oriented institutions, that is, the continuation of the male breadwinner model of the family. He adds that on the level of the individual especially the family shows itself to be extremely resistant to a balanced distribution of household activities and childcare.

Most of the political measures in many Western European countries persist in applying this model. The structures of the labour market also assume female 'additional income', as evidenced by the high percentages of part-time employment in Austria, Germany, and Sweden, and to a lesser degree female self-realization through gainful employment. Furthermore, in the past few decades the labour market has shown little tendency to break out from sex-specific segregation, either in its horizontal or vertical structure. In addition, the interrelation of both areas of unequal distribution of power, which are at the same time mutually dependent, is to be taken into account. And we know that consequences of women being responsible almost exclusively for family work are quite far-reaching (McRae 1997;Irwin 1999).
Anyhow, there are new challenges to acknowledge the urgency of making the connection between changes in women's 'consciousness', or subjectivity, and demographic change. 'Female' subjects increasingly are becoming part of debates, discourses and conferences, for example, a subject included more and more now in demographic conferences is research on the gender pay gap. Other topics are devoted to reproductive health or women's health (e.g. abortion, birth control and so on). It is becoming more and more common not simply to speak about 'man' but about women and their needs. So women are being restored to some active role in childbearing decisions (Federici et al. 1993).

CONCLUSIONS

As becomes clear from the different approaches to feminist theory, the concepts of sex and equality cover a wide range of viewpoints. While the Theory of Difference acknowledges differences, equality-based approaches advocate a sort of unisex view. Theories based in psychoanalysis and Marxism insist upon the formative effect of reproductive conditions upon women's lives. Motherhood itself however is largely regarded positively by theorists of difference, in contrast to proponents of theories of equality, who detect the cause for the discrimination of women in it.

Although Postmodern feminist theorists may no longer be clearly able to define what makes a person a woman, the attributions that occur with the mention of 'woman' or 'man' still have a great impact within social and political reality. While on the one hand sexual neutrality is professed, on the other, paradoxically, sexism continues to exist uncontested.

Besides the meaning that 'gender' has within women's studies, in general it can be observed that 'gender' has become an expression of general use in certain scientific disciplines and policies, at the cost of losing its substantial socio-critical background.

An appreciation of the problems regarding demography and gender exposes a male-biased approach towards demographic queries. The model of the male breadwinner/female homemaker is largely presupposed unquestioned. In economic theories, the true costs of family labour, which result from the birth of and care for children in women's lives (career, income, pension), are not labelled as such.

Following the suggestions of Neyer (2000) a new approach should question the ostensibly neutral concepts of 'family', 'women', 'education' etc. and the norms underlying these concepts. It should further attempt to develop an approach to demographic research that allows the inclusion of power structures and the changes of power on the private and public levels. Thus, there is scientific work to be done concerning the state of imbalance of power relations and power structures in the field of cultural, historical, social and political structures. Including a gender perspective (as a structural and procedural category) and a political perspective would open up the possibility of viewing fertility as an expression of the relation between women and men, society, economy and the state.
REFERENCES


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