

REPORT ON THE POTENTIAL USE OF THE PHYSICAL QUALITY OF LIFE INDEX IN THE  
STUDY OF THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN INDIA

Purchase order number: AID/otr-147-79-62 (and 63)  
Dated May 21, 1979

The Physical Quality of Life Index (POLI) is an instrument designed to measure the impact of development policy on the condition of the world's poor. It was developed by Dr. Morris David Morris under the auspices of the Overseas Development Council. Its general characteristics are described in the recently published book, Measuring the Condition of the World's Poor: The Physical Quality of Life Index (New York: Pergamon Press, 1979).

Dr. Morris and Dr. Michelle B. McAlpin, statistical consultant to the original project, spent July 22 - August 11, 1979 in New Delhi, India exploring with a variety of Indian academics and civil servants the potential uses of the POLI in the study of the status of women in India. Appendix 1 contains a summary list of the people with whom Drs. Morris and McAlpin discussed these and related issues. The remainder of the report addresses the three specific tasks specified in the purchase order.

(1) Analysis of kinds of indicators on women contained in the Indian censuses.

India possesses one of the longest series of decennial censuses in the world, certainly better than anything else in Asia or Africa. Enormous amounts of information were gathered in every census, a proportion of this was published, and a far smaller proportion has been analyzed to produce 100-year time series. Until very recently, the only 100-year series that were easily available were those on population totals. While some series for the states that now constitute the Indian Union (as distinguished from Pakistan and Bangla Desh) have been produced in the last ten to fifteen years, no more disaggregated studies had been done. In order to make use of the historical data for research and policy purposes, the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) and Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) began a project in the early 1970s on "Analysis and Utilization of Census and Related Data, 1872-1971". This ICSSR-JNU Census Project is directed by Dr. Asok Mitra, former Registrar General of India and Commissioner of the Indian Census.

In cooperation with the Women's Studies Cell at ICSSR (headed by Dr. Vina Mazumdar), the project has produced four major data sets that bear on the status of women.

(a) The first of these is the sex ratio (number of women per thousand men) for each of nearly 400 districts in India from 1901 to 1971. Reanalysis of census data was required to generate these figures because of changes in political boundaries over time. The sex ratio is regarded by the Women's Studies Cell at ICSSR (and by Asok Mitra) as a good proxy for the relative condition of women and men. Any decline in this ratio is regarded as indicating that women are suffering increased discrimination in some way -- employment opportunities, wages, access to health care, general social conditions. However, an examination of the sex ratios for districts and

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states from 1901 to 1971 reveals a great variety of levels, rates of change, and directions of change. The decline in the sex ratio for India as a whole -- a phenomenon that has attracted considerable attention -- is (in a statistical sense) caused by enormous declines in the ratio for several populous and backward states (Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar).

While the sex ratio data raise many interesting issues, they do not seem to confirm any simple set of hypotheses about the changing condition of women in India. Nor does it appear to us that it would be wise to use changes in the sex ratio as a guide to policy. So many variables can influence changes in this ratio -- changes in migration patterns is one example that has nothing in particular to do with the relative status of men and women -- that the assumption that it indicates changes in the relative condition of women and men seems unwarranted.

(b) The second major data set deals with the household and non-household activity of women. Unlike the data on sex ratios, the data on household and non-household employment has no historical component, being made up almost exclusively from the 1961 census. In general, information has been provided about the number and percentage of women workers in seventy household and non-household industry groups, disaggregated to the level of five multi-state zones for all of India, and by rural and urban residence.

While the information presented is interesting, the policy conclusions to be drawn are by no means clear. In the publication issued by ICSSR, the argument is made that industries where women predominate should be encouraged in order to give more women employment. Obviously, anyone familiar with the American women's movement and its concern with giving women opportunities to get out of traditionally female-dominated, low-paying jobs finds this emphasis strange. However, we were informed by an advisor to the Planning Commission that in drafts for the Sixth Five Year Plan all such emphasis on women-dominated industries had been dropped and replaced by strong incentives for all training schools, for almost all occupations, to include a substantial percentage of women (generally 25 percent) among their enrollees. Even so, further analysis to identify which of the occupations that are major employers of women may provide good employment and earning potentials and which do not seems needed.

The lack of any historical dimension makes impossible any analysis of how women's employment patterns may have been changing over time. Since the 1961 census was more extensive than any other census, directly comparable data from other years are not available. For recent periods, attempts are being made to use the National Sample Surveys to provide information on changes that are occurring.

(c) The third major data set is a historical survey of "gainful employment of women 1901-1971". The time series provided in this set are either for West Bengal only, for twenty major cities only, or for all-India. In addition, the industry classifications used are very broad. While some general inferences can be drawn from such numbers, no analysis of the causes of changing rates of employment in specific industries or for males and females can be done at such gross levels. The problems are further complicated by the definitions of labor force participation used in the 1971 census which tended to define women out of the labor force.

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Available published historical data on the employment of women appears to us to be very thin and difficult to use. Work on specific industries and in specific localities may enrich our historical sources, but such work must be undertaken by individually interested scholars. For the purposes of contemporary policy, the recent round of the National Sample Survey that attempted to identify all activities of women (market work, non-market work, in family or out, household or non-household) will probably provide the best starting point. The sample itself has been taken, but no published results are yet available. The questionnaire was designed by (among others) Dr. Raj Krishna, late of the Planning Commission, and Professor Pranab Bardhan, of the Indian Statistical Institute-Calcutta and University of California, Berkeley. Raj Krishna may be in Washington, D.C., at the World Bank after January; Bardhan continues at Berkeley for some time to come. We could work with either or both of them to provide the Women in Development office with an analysis of the National Sample Survey data on women's employment.

(d) The fourth and final data set concerning women that has resulted from the ICSSR-JNU project concerns literacy. Rather than being a new data set or even a re-analysis, the work on literacy has only provided a limited number of historical data on an all-India basis and classified districts according to the proportion of women literate in 1971. For actual data on the percentage of women literate in each district, it is necessary to consult another publication -- The Literacy Atlas, produced by the Linguistic Society of India.

In total, these data sets, while interesting and thought-provoking, are not adequate either for policy makers or for our purposes -- the preparation of PQLIs at the state level for males and females. However, it should be recalled that these data were assembled primarily to draw attention to some of the problems of women in South Asia. In that, they have enjoyed considerable success.

While the re-analysis of census data available from the Women's Studies Cell at ICSSR proved inadequate to our needs, information made available to us from the Office of the Registrar General has been more useful. The Registrar General and his staff were able to provide us with a variety of series derived (a) from analyses of the 1951, 1961, and 1971 censuses and (b) from the Sample Registration System (SRS) begun in the mid-1960s. From the former, we will be able to use literacy figures, by states, for males and females, for 1961 and 1971. The literacy figures appear to be of high quality (as indeed do most of the series prepared by the Registrar General's office) and they permit us to use the most desirable literacy percentage, namely the proportion of literates in the population 15 years old and over.

The SRS data are collected because the general quality of civil registration data in India is very poor. The SRS is intended to provide more accurate information for some time until the civil registration itself can be improved. While the people in charge of the Sample Registration System are not yet satisfied with its operation or its accuracy, it provides the best data available on age and sex specific mortality and on birth rates. These figures are crucial for the construction of life expectancy and infant mortality indexes, both measures that we need to construct PQLIs. Using data from SRS, it will be possible to produce a fairly full set of

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POLIs for males and females, in rural and urban areas, for most of the states of India, for 1971. Using other data on life expectancy and infant mortality derived from the censuses (generated by the demographic division of the Registrar General's Office), we also will be able to produce POLIs for 1961, by zones (groups of states) for males and females. No finer breakdowns will be possible for 1961 because the difficulties of constructing life tables from census data cannot be overcome except by using large enough units so that the effects of migration can be ignored. This is obviously not possible for rural vs. urban areas, nor is it generally possible for states as opposed to zones. (It can be done, but the quality of the resulting numbers is execrable.)

(2) Work with Dr. Asok Mitra.

Before leaving the United States, we spoke with Dr. Mitra who was then in Washington, D.C. He was cordial and interested and assured us that he would return to India well before we planned to leave New Delhi. Unfortunately, he was detained in Europe and did not return to New Delhi before our departure, even though we extended our stay somewhat. However, when it became clear that his return was unlikely, he made arrangements for us to meet with all of his top collaborators at the ICSSR-JNU project. We spent a long morning with them. From them we learned the exact scope and status of various parts of the overall project. Aside from re-analysis of population totals and the studies for the Women's Studies Cell commented upon above, the main focus of the project is on towns and their functions. There is no intention to attempt to re-analyze older censuses to produce new life tables, nor is any attempt being made to draw upon the reports of the Sanitary Commissioners to generate historical data on vital rates. The ICSSR-JNU enterprise is a very interesting project, but it is not one that will produce more data on women than those that have already appeared. Appendix 2 contains a list of its publications and works in progress. (We were not able to discover either from Dr. Mitra or from his colleagues that he himself was doing any work on POLI. We suspect that AID must have been misinformed on this point.)

(3) Feasibility of large-scale studies of the status of women in India, to be carried out under the sponsorship of ICSSR and with Indian scholars.

The Women's Studies Cell at ICSSR consists of two people -- Dr. Vina Mazumdar, its head, and Kumud Sharma, her colleague. They have persuaded a number of others attached to ICSSR to take cognizance of the special problems of women in their own projects, particularly projects that deal with poverty issues. In general, these two women seem to be more than fully occupied with the vetting and supervising of research grants, the preparation of reports for various government agencies, and the continuing work of making a wide spectrum of academics and government officials conscious of women's role in the economy and society. In our conversations with T.N.Madan (Member-Secretary of ICSSR) and Vina Mazumdar, it was made very clear to us that ICSSR does not lack for funds. Rather, the society as a whole is somewhat thin on really first-rate people who can be encouraged to work on projects that are concerned with the status of women. Given this situation, we do not see any scope for AID to engage in major funding of projects to be carried on with Indian personnel. The

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good people already in the field are fully occupied, and there is a dearth of other good people who might be pulled into the field. In fact, Vina Mazumdar told us that she and her colleagues at ICSSR would welcome individual United States scholars who would undertake research projects concerned with the status of women in India. Given the very generous cooperation we received from everyone with whom we made contact, we take this as a significant invitation.

If AID is seriously interested in research on the status of women in India, it will have a better chance of getting good work done by making funds available to United States scholars already at work on South Asia. The kind of work that seems to us to be needed is in sufficiently uncharted waters that it can only be done by committed investigators who are familiar enough with the region to be able to locate and use local sources of data -- e.g., the records of industries, trade unions, major employers of agricultural labor. This type of research effort is nearly impossible to organize from above, particularly if the promoters have a commitment to or a need for information that will make the development of immediate policy easier.

If AID is interested in supporting basic knowledge development because it will improve its policy-making capacities in the long run, it would certainly be useful to discuss this interest with the officers of the American Institute of Indian Studies (AIIS). The AIIS has the advantage of providing the most direct access to scholarly expertise on India. Equally important from the AID perspective, AIIS has an unbroken twenty-year record of close collaboration with the Indian research community as well as the advantage of effective cooperation with the Government of India certainly unmatched by any other group of foreign scholars or any other foreign agency.

In the United States, the officer to contact is:

Professor Edward C. Dimock Jr., President  
American Institute of Indian Studies  
1130 East 59th Street  
Chicago, Illinois 60637

In India, the officer to contact is:

Mr. P. R. Mehendiratta, Director  
American Institute of Indian Studies  
D-176, Defence Colony  
New Delhi 110024, India

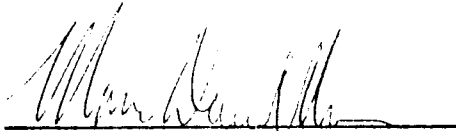
The purchase order required from us only the information provided above. We, of course, stand ready to provide whatever other advice and assistance may be needed.

At the suggestion of a number of our Indian contacts, we propose to use the data made available to us to prepare an essay on the Physical Quality of Life Index and the Status of Women in India 1961-1971. We expect to publish it in the Economic and Political Weekly (Bombay), the most influential policy-oriented social science journal in India. This will serve a variety of purposes. The essay, which will describe the POLI and relate it to specific Indian experience, should stimulate awareness of its usefulness as an index that

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can be used for general policy analysis as well as for issues specifically related to the status of women. The compilation of data and the analysis will serve as a baseline against which the results of the 1981 census can be placed. It will be possible to measure Indian policy effects on the population in general and on women specifically in urban areas and in the countryside, state by state. And finally, the essay will make the basic data available to India's policymakers and scholars as well as to similar people abroad, leaving them free to develop alternative formulations and interpretations.

From a preliminary examination of the data, we expect our work will show that the condition of women in India is much more varied by state than has generally been believed. The differences already visible imply that groups of states have performed quite differently. If so, we would tentatively conclude that development policies, if they are to improve the condition of women with any degree of efficiency, must not be designed to some general all-India model but must be tailored to these regional or structural differences. Such a conclusion will require us to think much more clearly about how women in India may become more effective participants in and beneficiaries of the economic development process.

  
Morris David Morris

  
Michelle B. McAlpin

6 September 1979

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Appendix One

PEOPLE IN NEW DELHI WITH WHOM FILLI PROJECT WAS SERIOUSLY DISCUSSED

Indian Council of Social Science Research

Dr. T.N.Madan, Member-Secretary  
Dr. Vina Mazumdar, Director of the Women's Studies Cell and Member-Secretary of the Advisory Committee on Women's Studies  
Kumud Sharma, member of the Women's Studies Cell

Indian Council of Social Science Research - Jawaharlal Nehru University  
Project on the Analysis and Utilization of Census and Related Data, 1872-1971

Dr. Ashish K. Chakraverti, Joint Director  
R.P.Sachdev, Joint Director  
G.C.Pant, Research Officer

Office of the Registrar General, Government of India

P. Padmanabha, Registrar General of India  
K.K.Chakravorty, Assistant Registrar General (Census and Tabulations)  
K.S.Natarajan, Senior Research Officer, Demography Division  
V. Subramaniaswamy, Senior Research Officer, Vital Statistics Division  
Tirath Dass, Officer-in-Charge, 1981 Census Operations

Planning Commission, Government of India

Dr. Raj Krishna, Member  
Dr. D.L.Sethi, Member  
Lavraj Kumar, Senior Advisor  
Dr. J. Krishnamurty, Consultant (Employment and Manpower)

Centre for the Study of Developing Societies

Dr. Ashish Nandy, Senior Fellow  
Dr. Ramashray Roy, Senior Fellow  
Dr. D.L.Sheth, Senior Fellow  
Amrita Rangaswami, Visiting Fellow

University of Delhi

Professor Sukumar Chakravarti, Department of Economics  
Dr. Lalita Chakravarti  
Dr. Veena Das, Department of Sociology  
Dr. D.B.Gupta, Institute for Economic Growth  
Professor K.A.Naqvi, Department of Economics

Ford Foundation, New Delhi

Dr. T. Kessinger  
Dr. V. Pande  
Dr. David Seckler

Miscellaneous

Radha Kumar, feminine activist in New Delhi  
P.R.Mehendiratta, Director, American Institute of Indian Studies  
Marie Sardie, Director of Nutritional Programs, Save the Children  
Foundation

Meetings with larger groups at which POLI and related issues were discussed.

- July 23. In her capacity as chairman of the subcommittee on South Asia Political Economy, sponsored by the American Council of Learned Societies - Social Science Research Council Joint Committee on South Asia, Dr. McAlpin met with a group at the Ford Foundation. The group included Dr. Veena Das, Dr. T. Bessinger, Dr. W. Ilchman, Dr. T.N. Madan, Mr. Rocky Staples, and Dr. D. Szanton.
- July 24 and 28. Dr. Morris and Dr. McAlpin led two long discussions organized by Dr. Vina Mazumdar. In attendance: various members of the ICSSR staff interested in the women's studies program as well as selected invitees from various New Delhi institutions and Government of India departments.
- July 26. Dr. McAlpin gave a seminar at the Delhi School of Economics on differential male-female mortalities under conditions of nutritional stress in western India, late 19th and early 20th centuries.
- August 1. Dr. Morris addressed a meeting on the POLI that was sponsored by the India International Centre. He was also interviewed on the subject by All-India Radio. (He had to refuse a television interview because of scheduling difficulties.)
- August 2. Dr. Morris lectured at the Delhi School of Economics on a topic that permitted him to explore some distinctions between tribally-organized and village-organized groups which may account for regional POLI differences within India and between South Asia and Africa.
- August 3. Dr. Morris presented a seminar at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies. In attendance: a group of senior social scientists who are permanently or temporarily affiliated with the Centre.

Useful meetings which did not occur.

- Dr. Rajni Kothari, Director of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies and Chairman, ICSSR, was in Europe. However, before his departure, he arranged for my discussions with members of the Centre. These took place, individually and in a seminar, August 3.
- Dr. Asok Mitra, Director of the ICSSR-JNU Project on the Analysis and Utilization of Census and Related Data, 1872-1971. Dr. Mitra was not able to return to India from Europe in time for us to meet him, even though we delayed our departure in the hope that a meeting could take place. However, he did arrange for us to discuss the project with his three top collaborators. This we did on August 4.



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Dr. M. Mukherjee, head of the ICSSR-sponsored Social Statistics and Social Indicators Programme, Calcutta. Dr. Mukherjee is a distinguished statistician and national income expert who recently published an article on certain technical aspects of the POLI. He and the New Delhi ICSSR group strongly urged us to visit him and other interested people in Calcutta. Our schedule did not make this possible.

Planning Commission, Government of India. A seminar was being arranged for Planning Commission staff and technicians. Unfortunately, the changes in government that were occurring made it impossible to schedule this while we were in Delhi. People in the Planning Commission also proposed to make arrangements for us to visit various state planning groups. They felt that these meetings would be useful for detailed work. Unfortunately, time did not permit our taking advantage of these opportunities.

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Appendix Two

PUBLICATION ACTIVITIES OF THE ICSSR-JNU CENSUS DATA PROJECT

A. Studies already published

1. Asok Mitra, India's Population: Aspects of Quality and Control. 2 vols. (New Delhi, 1978)
2. Sponsored by the ICSSR Programme of Women's Studies:
  - I. Asok Mitra, Implications of Declining Sex Ratio in India's Population (Bombay, 1979)
  - II. Asok Mitra, The Status of Women: Literacy and Employment (Bombay, 1979)
  - III. Asok Mitra, Adhir K. Srimany, and Lalit P. Pathak, The Status of Women: Household and Non-Household Economic Activity (Bombay, 1979)

B. Studies in press

1. "Population in Cities and Towns of India, 1872-1971"
2. "Population, Food and Land Inequality in India: A Geography of Hunger and Insecurity"

C. Studies in late stages of preparation

1. "A Factor-cluster Method of Functional Classification of all India's Cities and Towns, 1951-1971"
2. "Economic Structures of India's Cities, 1901-1961"
3. "Functional Classification of all Cities and Towns of India, 1961-71"