

Catherine Hakim

Yana van der Meulen Rodgers, *Maternal Employment and Child Health. Global Issues and Policy Solutions*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2011, vi+215 pp.

(doi: 10.2383/38282)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 2, maggio-agosto 2012

**Ente di afferenza:**

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

**Licenza d'uso**

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

## Book reviews

**Yana van der Meulen Rodgers, *Maternal Employment and Child Health. Global Issues and Policy Solutions*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2011, vi+215 pp.**

doi: 10.2383/38282

This book promises rather more than it delivers, which is a pity, because it presents a very useful analysis showing the absence of any consistent relationship (beneficial or damaging) between maternal employment and child health in developing countries in Asia.

Meulen Rogers carries out a secondary analysis of 2005-2009 data from the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS). This is a major cross-national comparative research programme, with surveys covering some 85 countries, that is designed and funded by USAID. She chooses 9 Asian countries with the aim of including countries that are reasonably similar enough for meaningful comparison while offering enough variation in social and economic conditions. Her analysis covers Nepal, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, the Maldives, Timore-Leste, Indonesia, Cambodia and the Philippines, and she offers brief portraits of them all, along with comparative statistics on literacy, maternal and child health, GDP and so on. Her three indicators of child health are those relevant to poor economies where adequate nutrition is often people's top priority, and the best indicator of family poverty, namely: birth size, stunting (low height for the child's age), and wasting (low weight for the child's height). An elegant research design ensures that she extracts data for mother-child pairs, that is, for babies and children up to the age of 5 years and their own mothers aged 15-49 years.

However this study of working mothers in developing countries is presented entirely through the perspective of debates raging in the USA and other western countries about the impact of mothers' paid jobs on their children's cognitive and emotional development, personality and educational attainment; debates about the positive or negative effects of institutional collective childcare in state nurseries; and debates about policies to promote gender equality in the workforce, as indicated by the size of the pay gap. A great deal of the literature she reviews concerns these quite different issues, using data for north America and Europe, that have only the most tenuous link to the question of maternal work in developing countries. Meulen Rodgers wants to believe that mothers' employment is beneficial for their children, as well as good for gender equality, and she seems to think this would be proven most conclusively in developing countries. But there is almost no connection between the two economic contexts, and her attempts to elide the differences throughout the book only confuses matters.

The book never once mentions that in many cultures outside the western world maternal employment is seen (with reason) as an indicator of poverty and financial stress; and that prosperous families often prefer to keep mothers at home full-time, not exclusively for status reasons. In fact, her results confirm this from the start: poor families are more likely to have working mothers, and as a general rule working mothers are associated with small size at birth, stunting and wasting in their offspring.

These results are clearly disappointing to the author, leading to some massaging of the reported headline findings. However the results of the multivariate analyses, albeit more complex, are not much more encouraging.

In developing countries, maternal employment is just as likely to lead to deterioration in a child's health as to any improvement. There are opposite results from different countries and on the three indicators she has chosen. However the impacts are invariably so tiny as to be of virtually no importance from a policy perspective anyway. For example, in some countries small birth size was reduced by 1% to 4%, net of other factors (notably household income). In some countries, wasting was increased by 1% to 3% net of other factors. In developing countries, where the main activity is often physically arduous labour in agriculture, on top of wives' hard work in the domestic economy, maternal employment is simply not the crucial, and beneficial, factor that Meulen Rodgers wants it to be. As a social scientist, Meulen Rodgers differentiates between mothers' work and household wealth, treating them as separate independent variables. But in the real world of developing countries they are rarely disentangled very effectively.

One chapter provides a useful review of the key facts about women's employment in the industrialised western world and in developing countries. Here too, Meulen Rodgers sidesteps the importance of the differences between the two contexts. It makes sense to discuss the pay gap in countries where most women and men are employees, with legal rights and employment benefits. It does not make quite the same sense in countries where very few people are employees in the formal sector, where most women (and men) work on the land or in the informal sector, in family businesses or farms, or as self-employed small traders. In her sample, up to half worked at home, between 20% and 90% worked in agriculture, between 3% and 83% were unpaid, and up to half were paid "in kind" only. As she notes at the very end, in this context access to microfinance loans and services can be crucial and employers may be non-existent. We are never told exactly what proportion of the mothers are wage workers in the formal sector in her nine countries. Equally important, we do not know whether the women typically kept their child with them when they worked, or whether the child was left with someone else (as in the Western world). All the photos in the book are of small traders who had their child with them when they went to market. This is one of the most fundamental differences between working mothers in the west and in many developing countries: physical separation of the mother and child cannot be assumed. In this context, western-style policy discussions of the "need for better childcare" can become complete nonsense.

The schizophrenic approach is further illustrated by her focus on childhood obesity. This is now a major problem in the USA and in some European countries, but virtually never in developing societies, and certainly not in relation to maternal employment as distinct from household wealth pure and simple. In developing countries, it is poor nutrition that is far more likely to be a problem, as this study acknowledges in its main focus on wasting and stunting.

In sum, the attempt to develop a global perspective on mothers' work, and on policy solutions, as advertised in the title, simply cannot work. This book is at its best as a study of developing countries in Asia. The key finding is that whether working is good for mothers or not (she does not say), it does their children as much harm as good as far as nutritional benefits are concerned. Maternal employment is not the

panacea that Meulen Rodgers wants to believe in. I thought it was a great pity that the DHS datasets cannot tell us anything about the children's cognitive and emotional development, which might actually have benefitted from years of close contact with the mother in infancy (whether she was working or not), but that would be another project entirely.

*Catherine Hakim*  
Centre for Policy Studies, London