Watering the neighbor’s garden: When do the poor invest in girls’ education?

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In India, educating daughters is called “watering the neighbor’s garden” – a wasteful expenditure. In recent years, as the link between better education of girls and lower fertility emerged, and gender equality was made a development goal, poor parents were put on the pillory. They were accused of their inability, or unwillingness, to limit the number of children. Large families have less to invest in their children, keeping them poor. They were also charged with discrimination. They preferred fewer daughters, and gave them fewer benefits.

Why do families invest less on girls? There may be two explanations. The argument from tradition holds that families are simply following prevalent norms. If families believe that daughters should be married off as soon as possible, they will not want to send the girls to school too long, regardless of consequences. The argument from economics, however, holds that families can, and do, make choices according to perceived benefits. Couples will have fewer children, and invest more in daughters’ education, if they feel this will give them good returns.

Evidence supports the latter. In poorer countries, children are seen as financial instruments, and couples may want large families as “insurance” for old age. Parents in China and Bangladesh having fewer children were found to save more. Since parents expect sons to support them, they invest in them. They may even eliminate daughters (through sex-selective abortion or neglect of infant girls) to minimize “loss.” Studies show that when girls have better prospects in labor market or marriage market, they have a better chance of survival – mortality rate of infant girls varies with job and marriage prospects. Good job prospects brighten the chances of better education for girls, as Jensen found by facilitating BPO jobs for girls in India. Banerjee and Duflo thus argue that better social safety nets may lead to smaller families and less gender discrimination.

Will this work? While daughters in a small family may have advantages over daughters in large families, it is not clear how either may have equal advantages as their brothers. It is the rich in India and China who abort unborn daughters. Tradition operates through institutions like inheritance laws, dowry and religious rituals which deprive women from assets and honor. A parent may not regard her daughter’s potential income attractive enough to offset such deep socio-economic “loss.” Demand side constraints in education will continue, while markets will encourage low-wage “women’s work” in tea gardens or call centers. Girls will live better than their mothers, but worse than their brothers. Women’s contribution to GDP will rise while their share in population falls. Disparity does not begin at home. Family is the end operator of power relations. Interactions between markets and families operate within the institutions created or supported by state, such as ownership of property and custody of children. Reforms in these institutions will determine whether girls survive, and go to school more fundamentally than creating better saving instruments or job prospects.