

## Reviews

doi:10.1017/S0144686X11001267

Moneer Alam and Armando Barrientos (eds), *Demographics, Employment and Old Age Security: Emerging Trends and Challenges in South Asia*, Macmillan Publishers India, New Delhi, 2010, 480 pp., pbk Rs 990.00, ISBN 13: 978 0230 33167 9.

Despite the volume of papers on ageing in high-income countries, it is in Asia that the global population of people over 60 is currently, and will be increasingly, concentrated. In 2000 the United States of America (USA) had the third largest population aged 60 plus, but its over-60 population was only 60 per cent of India's over sixties. By 2050 the USA's over-60 population will have fallen to 33 per cent of India's over sixties. Not only is South Asia undergoing much more rapid population ageing than did high-income countries, but this is happening in a context in which 40 per cent of people live below the international poverty line of \$1.25 (in 2005 purchasing power parity). Further, there is considerable intra-regional diversity in terms of national income, spanning the low-income countries of Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Nepal through to the upper middle-income country of the Maldives; and in the pace of fertility transition in which Sri Lanka and the Maldives have fallen below replacement level while Afghanistan and Pakistan are still growing.

These facts alone would make Alam and Barrientos' book on emerging trends and challenges in South Asia essential reading for those interested in the economics of population ageing. However, the real importance of this volume of 25 chapters lies in the way it places the issues of population ageing within the wider context of high levels of poverty, low productivity, informalisation of work, economic crises and a large youth bulge. Based on a two-day conference at the Institute of Economic Growth in Delhi, India, in November 2008, this volume, when viewed as a whole, is suggestive of the need for a new approach to ageing in low- and middle-income countries – an approach that unsettles the received wisdom of 'old age burden' and 'the family system for care of the elderly', replacing it with one that combines a focus on old age agency with a critique of public policy and (global) resource distribution.

The path-breaking chapters focus on work in old age. In Nepal 60 per cent of men aged over 65 are still working, as are 34 per cent of women (Shrestha, Chapter 5); Sri Lanka's percentage of older men working is lower than that of India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, yet it still has 50 per cent of men aged 60–69 working and 20 per cent of men aged over 70 working. Older people work long hours until they are forced out of work by ill health: for example, in Sri Lanka part-time workers in their seventies average 36 hours per week, while full-time workers in their sixties work 48 hours

(Arunatalike, Chapter 4). The shortage of work, especially part-time work, and the competition for work due to the large youth bulge has resulted in a decline in the number of South Asian men working in later life while the number of older women working is increasing (Islam, Chapter 9). In Pakistan, for example, women are entering the labour force later than men and stay longer, in order to compensate for male unemployment, although 38 per cent of elderly women in Pakistan are unable to find work (Durr-y-Nayab, Chapter 2) while in Bangladesh the only growing employment status (1996–2006) was unpaid family employment, which accounts for 34 per cent of older women's work (Rahman, Chapter 3). Most older people in South Asia live in rural areas and do agricultural work. In urban areas older people suffer age discrimination in relation to wages, so men tend to concentrate into self-employment in semi-skilled and unskilled work while women's work is more evenly split between unskilled self-employment and unpaid family labour (Rahman, Chapter 3; Arunatalike, Chapter 4).

By challenging the idea of what constitutes the 'working generation', this volume sets the usual suspects in studies of population ageing (demographic structure, pension and health) in a new light. The lack of public provision for health-care security and the very rapid growth of the oldest age groups, most of whom are women, means that the oldest people are being cared for by people (women) who are themselves aged (Alam, Chapter 15): quite a different story from the aged as young person's care burden. Similarly, the volume puts the lie to widespread arguments regarding the unaffordability of pensions, locating the obstacle in the field of politics rather than economics. Rajan's comparison of pension provision in India and Nepal demonstrates that even the poorest South Asian country, Nepal, can still manage to deliver a universal pension, at age 70; while India caps the pension budget in order to exclude a large proportion of those eligible for the national means-tested pension (Chapter 19). There is no social pension for the aged in Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan; while Bangladesh and, since publication of the book, the Maldives, have pensions although the rates provided are generally so low that older people continue to work.

This volume unsettles much that we think we know about ageing, intergenerational support and the economy: it challenges the view that the economy is based on the work of younger people, that older people are not working and do not wish to work, that families are capable of supporting their old and that care is provided by the young to the old rather than by the old to the old. Overall, the volume challenges number-crunching approaches for their selectivity: issues of poverty, productivity, economic growth and social protection are not defined by demographic or even economic processes but by the way political processes frame labour market institutions and structure resource distribution.

Birkbeck, University of London, UK

PENNY VERA-SANSO