

Book review

Land and Schooling: Transferring Wealth across Generations

Agnes R. Quisumbing, Jonna P. Estudillo, and Keijiro Otsuka (Eds.), Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD, 2004, 304 pp., US\$58.00, ISBN: 080187842X

Quisumbing, Estudio, and Otsuka examine how parents' decisions to bequeath land and educate their sons and daughters can help promote or hinder gender equity. To address this issue, they provide evidence from three different regions of the world and synthesize their findings. The primary hypothesis tested is that parents desire equal outcomes for their sons and daughters, but this need not mean an equal distribution of assets. Instead of focusing on whether parents ensure that sons and daughters attain equal amounts of schooling and inherit equal parcels of land, the authors test whether a proxy for income (per capita expenditure) is equal across sons and daughters in their adult years. The general idea is that schooling and land may be viewed as substitute forms of capital, and men and women may obtain different returns from each. An unequal distribution of these two assets may produce equal outcomes and could possibly be more efficient.

While most of the literature on gender equity in developing countries is focused on gender differences in schooling, wages, or child labor, the authors have undertaken a more difficult empirical issue by studying the effect of intergenerational transfers on gender equity. Decisions linked to the transfer of wealth from one generation to the next are of fundamental importance to understanding issues linked to economic opportunity. The U.S. literature provides strong support for the view that economic position is passed on from one generation to the next (see, e.g., Zimmerman, 1992). Furthermore, Gittleman and Wolff (2004) show that intergenerational transfers are linked to racial inequities in the United States. They find that while labor markets

have recently helped to reduce racial discrepancies in economic well-being, the effect of asset inheritance has been stronger in increasing the gap between races. Recognizing the importance of inheritance to the issue of economic equity, Quisumbing, Estudillo, and Otsuka have collected data from three regions of the world for three generations to study how intergenerational transfers of the two most important forms of capital in developing rural areas (education and land) affect gender differences in economic well-being.

Part 1 of the book provides the strongest evidence for the maintained hypothesis that parents aim for equal outcomes for their sons and daughters. In this part, the authors study households from five villages in Central Luzon and Panay Island in the Philippines. The text sets up the econometric analysis by first providing anthropological and institutional detail of inheritance, schooling, and agriculture customs and practices. In the study villages from Central Luzon the book informs us that land is traditionally transferred as a gift to newly married sons, while in Panay Island sons and daughters inherit land more equally. The main use of land in the areas studied is the cultivation of rice, and we learn that men have a comparative advantage in this activity. The survey data indicate that sons inherit on average 0.15 hectares more of land, but daughters stay in school for 1.5 more years. The analysis indicates that this distribution is equitable because the annual incomes of the sons and daughters are approximately equal. Furthermore, the authors suggest that it is efficient for daughters to receive more schooling and less land because their relative returns are greater in non-farm work, thereby maximizing the sum of sons and daughters' incomes.

Part 2 explores these issues for the 262 sample households in the Kerinci and Bungo Tebo districts of Sumatra, Indonesia. Both of these areas had a tradition of matrilineal inheritance, though more recently this system has undergone substantial transformation.

In Kerenci, land inheritance has moved toward an egalitarian distribution between sons and daughters. In Bungo Tebo, the system has moved toward bequeathing land according to gender-specific comparative advantages in farm production. In terms of schooling, the data indicate improvement over time in the allocation of schooling. There is evidence that the parents of the respondents' generation favored males over females in terms of schooling, but this preference has dissipated over time with the distribution now more equal between sons and daughters. The analysis of the income differences between sons and daughters is somewhat more mixed than in part 1, but generally support the maintained hypothesis that economic outcomes are equal.

Part 3 examines the Wassa area of western Ghana, which is predominantly inhabited by Akan households. The traditional inheritance system of the Akan involves the transfer of land from the deceased male to his sister's sons (uterine matrilineal), but over time this system appears less practiced as husbands transfer land as gifts prior to death to their own family. The evidence from Ghana is the least supportive of the book's maintained hypothesis. Sons are favored in acquisition of land and schooling, and this ultimately translates to higher incomes than for daughters.

The mix of institutional detail with empirical analysis makes this book very compelling and informative reading. The overall view of this book is encouraging in that it suggests that parents make schooling and land inheritance decisions with the goal of equating the well-being of their sons and daughters. With a research agenda this demanding though, there will be some weaknesses in the analysis, and one such issue is whether this finding is representative of other regions

of the studied countries (or other countries). Indeed the authors note that the sample villages are relatively unusual, particularly since they do not include any areas practicing the presumably more common patrilineal inheritance system. Another issue is that many of the findings are based on failing to reject hypotheses. For example, outcomes are assumed equitable because the difference between male and female incomes is not statistically significant. Because the data needs require an extensive number of questions (essentially combining an agriculture survey with a consumption and expenditure survey), sample sizes are small, and one is left to question the power of the tests. Does failure to reject the null hypothesis indicate equality of point estimates, or imprecise estimates? These are, of course, the standard problems one encounters when attacking such complex problems. Nonetheless, this book rewards the reader with fascinating cultural detail and a much broader scope of analysis than is usually attempted for studies on the dynamics of gender equity.

References

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