

ON THE PROSPECTS FOR ENDLESS FERTILITY DECLINE IN SOUTH ASIA

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In the demographic literature, the semantics of fertility decline have led to some interesting confusion. In particular, confusion has been caused by the tendency to use interchangeably the terms “global fertility decline” and “global convergence in fertility”. But the two are not the same thing at all. While it is true that it now appears that the whole world has embarked on a process of fertility decline, it does not follow from this that the whole world is headed to exactly the same eventual fertility levels or that all societies do/will reach eventual low fertility by the same means. There is sufficient variation even within the countries currently in “post-transition” to belie this conclusion.

Two empirical findings have probably contributed to this confusion between ‘global decline’ and ‘global convergence’. First, there is now enough evidence that non-academic populations have never heard of something called ‘replacement level fertility’ and thus do not take this into consideration in planning their fertility at the family level. In country after country in the industrialized world, fertility declines have plummeted well below the replacement mark and thrown much planning based on past population projections out of gear. Population projectors of the past have by now received plenty of criticism for treating replacement level fertility as some kind of sacrosanct end point in the fertility transition. By now, it is well accepted that the magical total fertility rate (TFR) of around 2.1 is little more than a convenient analytical device. With this recognition, population projections of recent times have been boldly assuming eventual fertility levels that would laugh at the forecasters of population doom of the last century.

Having discarded the logic of replacement level fertility as a plausible end-point in the fertility transition for the developed world, it naturally followed that there was nothing sacrosanct about this end point for the developing world either. This intuition has been strengthened by the second empirical finding in recent years. This finding is that the process of fertility decline is much better explained by theories of diffusion (which are essentially theories of copycat behavior) than by theories built around structural factors that affect the costs and benefits of childbearing. The great range of conditions under which fertility has begun to fall all over the developing world, and the most potent correlates of such decline – education, exposure to the mass media, exposure to the *ideologies* (rather than the material trappings) of modernization – strongly suggests that the urge to control fertility and to have fewer children than one’s parents comes largely from wanting to do what others do.

But do diffusion theories of fertility decline and the irrelevance of the concept of replacement fertility really imply that eventual stable fertility levels will be globally similar? Do the structural and cultural circumstances of individual societies not have any power to decide on the finer details of fertility change? My own feeling is that this might be the case “eventually”, if “eventually” is defined lengthily enough; but that in the relative short-term of a few decades, even as many as five decades, perhaps geographical and cultural variation will temper the move to global convergence.

This skepticism about global convergence is supported by the still significant differences in fertility in the developed world. Even if all these countries now have below replacement fertility levels, they nevertheless exhibit a range of sub-replacement fertility levels; completed fertility for the 1960 birth

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cohort ranged from 2.10 in France in 1994 to 1.65 in Germany in 1992 and Italy in 1996 (Bongaarts, 2001). A difference of half a birth is not small, given the low base levels at which this difference occurs.

Skepticism about the prospects of global convergence is also supported by the wide range of measures on the proximate determinants of fertility in the developed world. Variations in marriage, contraceptive use, abortion are pervasive enough to suggest, even if faintly, that the eventual similarity of fertility levels might be something of a coincidence. Such a conclusion would be exaggerated to be sure (given that ideas about completed family size are an important determinant of completed family size), but it would not be wholly false.

In this paper, I want to use the lessons drawn from this variation in the proximate determinants to look at some of the plausible¹ ways in which future fertility in South Asia might not drop to levels as low as many parts of the developed world today. As already mentioned, it is a fairly short-term future that I am concerned with; at the end of this century, it may well be the case that we all inhabit a world that not only eats hamburgers and drinks coke, but also one in which all groups marry at exactly the same rate, use the same kind of contraception, and want and bear exactly the same number of children.

In the following sections I look at two of the proximate determinants of fertility – non-marriage, and childlessness within and outside marriage. The proximate determinants framework was the standard tool to study fertility in the seventies and eighties, but with time, our interest in these determinants had narrowed down to focus almost exclusively on contraceptive use, the assumption being that this is the primary variable capable of explaining fertility differentials. But I want to suggest here that some modified notion of ‘natural fertility’ can remain an important part of the explanation for below replacement fertility in many societies today. And finally, in a very small section, I speculate about the current stagnation in fertility declines in some parts of South Asia.

NON-MARRIAGE

Attempts to attribute fertility decline in the developing countries typically try to separate out the impact of increasing ages at marriage and falls in fertility within marriage. There is a large literature now on how a delay in the age at marriage can lead to declines in both natural fertility (because it reduces the length of exposure to the risk of pregnancy) as well as volitional fertility (because delayed marriage comes with a number of other things that reduce the demand for children).

But the experience of the developed countries suggests that where marriage is concerned, what might eventually have a greater impact on TFRs is not later marriage as much as *non-marriage*. Delayed marriage should merely, *ceteris paribus*, push up the mean age at childbearing and change period fertility rates².

But in many parts of the below-replacement fertility world, and especially in those countries in which TFRs have fallen to unusually low levels even by sub-replacement standards (such as Italy and Spain), increased levels of non-marriage are an important reason for these low TFRs. That is, it is not so much that marital fertility levels have descended to unprecedented lows as the fact that fewer women are contributing to these TFRs because a larger number of women are not getting married at all. High levels of non-marriage are of course important in observed fertility declines primarily in societies which frown upon childbearing outside marriage; countries such as Italy and Spain. Indeed, recent data suggest that even cohabitation outside marriage (and not merely childbearing outside marriage) is rare in the Mediterranean countries (and Japan), for reasons which are partly economic and partly cultural.

To illustrate, I look at some of the figures cited at an earlier meeting of the United Nations Population Division (United Nations, 1999) which discussed the fertility prospects of countries with

below replacement fertility. Both absolute levels of and trends in non-marriage in many of these countries are striking. In Germany, for example, over 90 per cent of the birth cohorts of the 1930s and 1940s got married at least once; this figure is expected to fall to 70-80 per cent for the 1960 cohort (Dorbritz and Hohn, 1999). In Spain, at least 80 per cent of women born in the 1940s and earlier were ever-married, compared to about 68 per cent of the 1961 birth cohort (Frejka and Ross, 2001). In Japan, the proportions of women aged 30-34 never married has risen from 7.2 in 1970 to 19.7 in 1995 (Kaneko, 1999).

However, there also continue to be wide variations in non-marriage in the developed world. Thus we have the phenomenon of about 8 per cent of women aged 45 and over in Norway and Sweden being never-married in 1997, compared to 11 per cent in Italy and Spain and only 5 per cent in the United States (United Nations, 1997). Currently younger cohorts will probably push these figures upwards. The impact of these differences on TFRs gets magnified or reduced by their differences in extramarital fertility, so that the United States still continues to hover around replacement (as do Norway and Sweden, but in the opposite direction, i.e. a bit below replacement), while Spain, Italy and Japan have TFRs around 1.4.

I briefly discuss some of the reasons for these trends at the end of this paper. Here it is sufficient to stress that (in the absence of premarital childbearing) it is easy to see how sub-replacement fertility can occur in spite of little change in marital fertility rates and desired fertility levels.

What lessons do these non-marriage rates suggest for South Asia? The variations in this measure in the low fertility world suggest that there is little reason to expect non-marriage to become common in all parts of the developing world too. Even within South Asia, can one anticipate a similar “retreat from marriage” (Becker, 1981)? If this did occur, it would lead to a decline in TFRs faster than that anticipated merely by looking at changes in marital fertility.

Given the general proposition that any kind of prediction of social trends is a dangerous enterprise, and given the great enthusiasm so far for all things ‘western’ in many parts of the developing world (it is no wonder that diffusion theories have become so much more popular in recent years), one’s educated guess on this subject may be quite off, but is still worth making. And my educated guess is that significant levels of non-marriage are still very far off in the South Asian future. For one thing there is no history of non-marriage in this region, unlike in Western Europe, for example, where a certain proportion of women remaining unmarried for life was an expected and acceptable feature of society (Hajnal, 1965). For the South Asian countries (as well as for China, incidentally) the joke has always been that there is no impediment to marriage – neither physical nor economic; whatever a woman’s disadvantages, a ‘suitable’ groom can and will always be found. And purely practical matters such as a shortage of housing or employment have not stood in the way of the South Asian system of marriage either.

Not only is there no real history of a significant amount of non-marriage, this region does not even show signs of such a history developing. In the latest rounds of the DHS and NFHS for example, a mere 1.4 per cent of women aged 30-49 in India in 1998-99 were ‘never-married’ and a mere 2 per cent of Pakistani women aged 35-39 in 1990-91 were never-married. It is difficult to think of these low figures indicating any kind of ‘trend’ in rising rates of non-marriage.

VOLUNTARY CHILDLESSNESS

But of course it is true that non-marriage does not necessarily debar women from childbearing. And premarital fertility is not absent in many of these societies with high and increasing levels of non-marriage. But (a) non-marital fertility levels rarely reach levels of marital fertility even in the most industrialized societies, and (b) pre-marital fertility levels are extremely low in the countries of lowest TFRs. For instance, pre-marital births make up a relatively small proportion of total births in the lowest fertility countries of the industrialized world (8 per cent in Italy in 1995 (Golini, 1999) and 13.7 in

Germany in 1996 (Dorbritz and Hohn, 1999)). These are high compared to say France and the United Kingdom (between 32-35 per cent in 1995 (Golini, 1999)) and Sweden (52 per cent in 1995 (Golini, 1999)), but still significantly higher than in a very low fertility country such as Japan (1.2 per cent in 1995 (Kaneko, 1999)).

That is, the contribution of non-marital childlessness to total fertility varies. In addition, there is certainly a case to be made for adding levels of and trends in childlessness *in general* (whether voluntary or involuntary, whether determined by proscriptions on premarital cohabitation and pregnancies, or overlong delays in trying to begin childbearing, or desired childlessness within marriage) to forecasts of future fertility in other parts of the world. In any case, analytically it is usually best to look at childlessness in general; not by marital status. The latter is so fluid and changes so often with reproductive behavior that it is difficult to really disentangle childbearing within and outside marriage.

Trends in childlessness across the developed world are striking. In West Germany for example, while 10 per cent of the 1940 birth cohort remained childless, this figure has risen to 23 per cent for the 1960 cohort (Dorbritz and Hohn, 1999). In Japan, given the virtual absence of any premarital childbearing, the proportions of women remaining childless are at least as high as the high proportions never married in the last section. In Italy, 18 per cent of the 1963 cohort remained childless (Golini, 1999). In Norway, for women aged 35 and over, the proportion childless increased from 11.6 per cent for the 1950 birth cohort to 16.5 per cent for the 1963 birth cohort (Lappagard, 2000). On the other hand, countries like the United States, in which fertility levels are closer to replacement, childlessness too is less common and probably declining.

One of the ways of looking at the contribution of childlessness to total fertility rates would be to look at the distribution of TFRs in different countries at the time of replacement level fertility. If the move to replacement is fuelled primarily by the extinction of higher order births, then the long-term implications may be different from if it is caused by a substantial amount of childlessness. That is, if the long-term trend is towards a homogeneity in fertility rates the stabilization level will be different than if the trend is towards a break in country populations into groups with drastically different fertility levels (many childless and many with two or more births).

While it is true that the greater part of post-transitional fertility decline has been caused by the reduction of higher order births, it also appears from the Europe and Japan data that significant and sustained below replacement total fertility requires a significant level of childlessness. Such childlessness is possible if marriage has to be indefinitely delayed for a number of economic or social reasons *and* premarital childbearing is not acceptable (as in Italy or Spain for example), but is also possible if there is an increasing trend towards complete childlessness *within* marriage.

All the evidence suggests that once childlessness is removed, TFRs of around 2 continue to be common; that is, the majority of women who bear one child go on to bear a second one, even in sub-replacement fertility societies, it is the proportion of third order births that has continued to fall steadily. For example, in Norway, for women who had a first child, as many as 80 per cent went on to have a second child (Ronson, 2001). Similarly, the current TFR of 1.77 in Australia is the result of 22 per cent of women remaining childless, 15 per cent having one child, 35 per cent, two children, 20 per cent, three and 7 per cent, 4 or more children (Caldwell and Caldwell, 1999). These childless women are an important source of Australia's low fertility and if they did not exist, the TFR would have been closer to 2.2 by my rough calculation.

I have already sounded skeptical about the immediate prospects for significant levels of non-marriage in South Asia. What about the immediate prospects for significant levels of voluntary childlessness within marriage in this region? The question becomes: How is a given level of TFR more

likely to be achieved in the South Asian countries? Will/does a TFR of two imply more often that there is little variation around this mean or is it more likely to be the result of different sub-groups of the population exhibiting very different reproductive regimes?

Is the Australian example any guide to future behavior in the developing world? Might childlessness become common in any subgroups of the population? One way of speculating on this issue would be to try and understand the motives for childlessness in the industrialized world. Is this a voluntary state or is it, as Caldwell and Caldwell (2000) suggest, a result of birth deferment until it is too late? If it is the latter, it is plausible that in the developing world (which has generally shown itself to be a fast learner once it decides to copy the developed country experience – the best example of this of course is the relative speed of mortality decline in the two regions), women will become more pragmatic about combining work with reproduction. So that not only will there be fewer childless women than currently in Australia, there may also be less of the gap between period and cohort fertility of the kind Bongaarts and Feeney (1998) caution against. Indeed, Australian fertility itself may eventually rise as this unwanted impact of birth deferment is more clearly anticipated.

But if childlessness represents a deliberate choice (as is also possible in a world of increasing sensitivity to what may be called a child-unfriendly world – that is, women may choose not to reproduce as often for their unborn children's sakes as for their own convenience), then one needs to make some educated guesses about the rise of voluntary childlessness in the developing world. And one's guess based on the cultural imperatives in most of the developed world is that voluntary childlessness is unlikely to become the defining feature of any significant sub-group of the developing world of today, at least over the next several decades. It is certainly not likely to be an important feature of fertility decline in South Asia. While the ideological change that accompanies the shift from high fertility to low fertility is often compatible with existing norms about family life and about the well-lived life in general, the cultural and normative shift required to move from wanting few children to wanting no children is too massive to be realistically expected to grow out of existing trajectories of development, education and modernization. We do not have the kind of data for South Asia that exist through the sets like the World Values Surveys in the developed world. But, intuitively, the findings on 'post-modern' sensibilities in these surveys do not look as if they would apply to the South Asian developing world in the near future (see, for example, Van De Kaa, 2001).

These conclusions are also supported by the low levels of voluntary childlessness in the low fertility countries of Asia. For example, in Japan, even though childbearing begins later than in the United States, levels of childlessness are much lower than in the United States (Morgan, Rindfuss and Parnell, 1989). Similarly, even in urban China, which represents the Chinese region with the lowest fertility, this low fertility has been achieved by an increasing homogenization of the population – virtually 'everyone' gets married and virtually 'everyone' bears a first child. Low fertility is not a result of some couples remaining childless and others having two or more children (Zhao, 2001). Marriage may be delayed but it is still to be abandoned; and once entered into, automatically leads to a first birth - in the early 90s, some 98 per cent of women below the age of 30 were 'ever-married' and 97 per cent of these went on to have a first child.

This "Asian" pattern of non-childlessness has its counterparts in the intermediate level fertility countries of South Asia as well. In the 1998-99 round of the Indian NFHS, only 2.9 per cent of currently-married women aged 35-39 had borne no children, suggesting nothing more than involuntary infecundity. The corresponding figure for Pakistan in 1990-91 was 2.7 per cent and Bangladesh, 1.3 per cent, Nepal in 1996, 1.2 per cent, Sri Lanka in 1987, 4.2 per cent. And the few available studies on childlessness in this region find that heroic attempts are made to overcome it when it occurs (see, for example, Unisa, 1999).

When one is extrapolating from the experience of the developed world to forecast trends in developing country fertility, one thus needs to disaggregate the TFRs of contemporary low fertility countries before drawing any lessons. In the particular kind of disaggregation just discussed, the lesson may well be that in fact we are being unduly optimistic in our predictions about future trends in fertility in the developing world and unduly pessimistic about the prospects for fertility remaining so much below replacement in many parts of the developed world. If childlessness is such a significant proportion of this sub-replacement fertility and if it gradually decreases, then so will sub-replacement fertility. The convergence that then arises may well bring us back to what early population projections assumed – a universal desire for and achievement of replacement level fertility!

THE 'SPEED' OF FERTILITY DECLINE

It is worth noting that even if fertility decline has been smooth and linear in the developed countries and in those developing countries which have begun a fertility transition, it need not remain to be smooth all the way to below replacement or even replacement levels. Here again, we do not know enough about the assumptions to put into our population projections. We accept that there has to be a fall in the TFR of about 10 per cent for the fall to be irreversible and to continue, but we do not explicitly acknowledge that the continued fall may experience another break or two along the way to replacement. This 'hard core' of fertility which requires more time and effort to be overcome may need to be incorporated into population projections in different ways from the current method of positing three eventual fertility outcomes. Not is it sufficiently captured by looking at the "speed" of decline. One presumes that even if two populations reach replacement level fertility at the same point of time, their total sizes will differ if one reached it by a linear fall in fertility while the other reached half way there and then spent several years at this half way point before tumbling down to catch up with its neighbor's TFR. Whether this second population would end up smaller or larger than the first would depend on where in the transition it stopped to take a rest.

This point becomes particularly relevant for countries that have a core level of wanted fertility that is above replacement. India comes particularly to mind. There is some indication that while survey respondents in India are perfectly willing to not have 4-5 children as child mortality falls and contraceptive services become easily available, they are not willing to do this endlessly. In particular, they are not willing to forego the one (and preferably two) sons that they see as essential for economic, spiritual and social salvation. Thus fertility may well stagnate at a TFR of around 3 for several years before the education and modernization needed to change this particular ideology of childbearing can have effect. The recent stagnation of fertility decline in Bangladesh (and perhaps in India as well) certainly suggests that this is not a far-fetched story.

What recommendations does one make about fertility assumptions to go into more realistic projections? Does one go for more disaggregated endpoints? Or more alternative speeds of decline? In particular, a case may be made for treating laggards as different in more than just the timing of onset and the speed of decline. Not only is there a hard core of resistance to fertility decline in some populations, once these resistant populations enter the fertility transition, at first they may be willing to go thus far and no further. One needs to give some thought to methods of factoring this 'period of rest' into population projections.

DISCUSSION

This whole paper runs the serious risk of becoming a platform for "South Asian Values". That is certainly not its intention, especially if such a platform means that South Asian values in demographic behavior are something to be celebrated. If anything, much that is peculiarly South Asian in the demographic regimes that may eventually characterize this region may well be what will lead to

conformity with the universal experience in terms of below-replacement fertility. For example, this paper suggests that South Asian patterns of patriarchy and gender inequality and cultural prescriptions about the need for women to become wives and mothers may lead to fertility stabilization at replacement or slightly-above-replacement-levels. But I am also conscious that these same factors may well be what will promote sub-replacement fertility; except that this sub-replacement fertility will not be strictly analogous to sub-replacement fertility in the industrialized world. It might instead be sub-replacement fertility achieved by the medical technology that allows the fertility demands of South Asian patriarchy to be satisfied. That is, fertility declines may well turn out to be quick and easy and close to western levels because these techniques accommodate South Asian preferences by allowing a preponderance of sons to be born.

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NOTES

¹ It is important to specify the word “plausible” – given the way unexpected events have become an increasingly defining feature of the world in recent times, it may well be that all predictions of future behaviour deserve nothing but dismissal.

² But of course the world is not ‘ceteris paribus’. Delayed marriage is associated, in most parts of the developing world, with lower fertility desires (Jejeebhoy, 1994); that is not our concern here, our concern is with delayed marriage as a factor in reducing first and second order births.