

Women's Empowerment and Fertility: Policy Lessons

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Outline of talk

- Defining the issue
 1. How does greater control over childbearing empower women?
 - a. Increases female labor-force participation and earnings
 - b. Especially empowers the most disadvantaged women
 - c. Helps improve women's health
 - d. Enhances children's life-chances
 2. What constrains women's control over their childbearing?
... and how can family planning programmes help?
 - a. Low decision-making power in the household
 - b. Mobility constraints in some settings
 - c. Exposure to early childbearing
 3. Conclusions

Defining the issue

- Women's empowerment and gender equality are complex & multi-faceted
 - Encompass a wide range of interventions to help women be independent actors in the economy, polity, and society, e.g. legal changes, schooling, etc.
 - These work over the long term, can require substantial resources and implementation capacity
- Focus here on how greater control over the number and timing of childbearing
 - Helps women gain control over their lives
 - Empowers them along several dimensions

SECTION 1

**HOW DOES GREATER CONTROL OVER
CHILDBEARING EMPOWER WOMEN?**

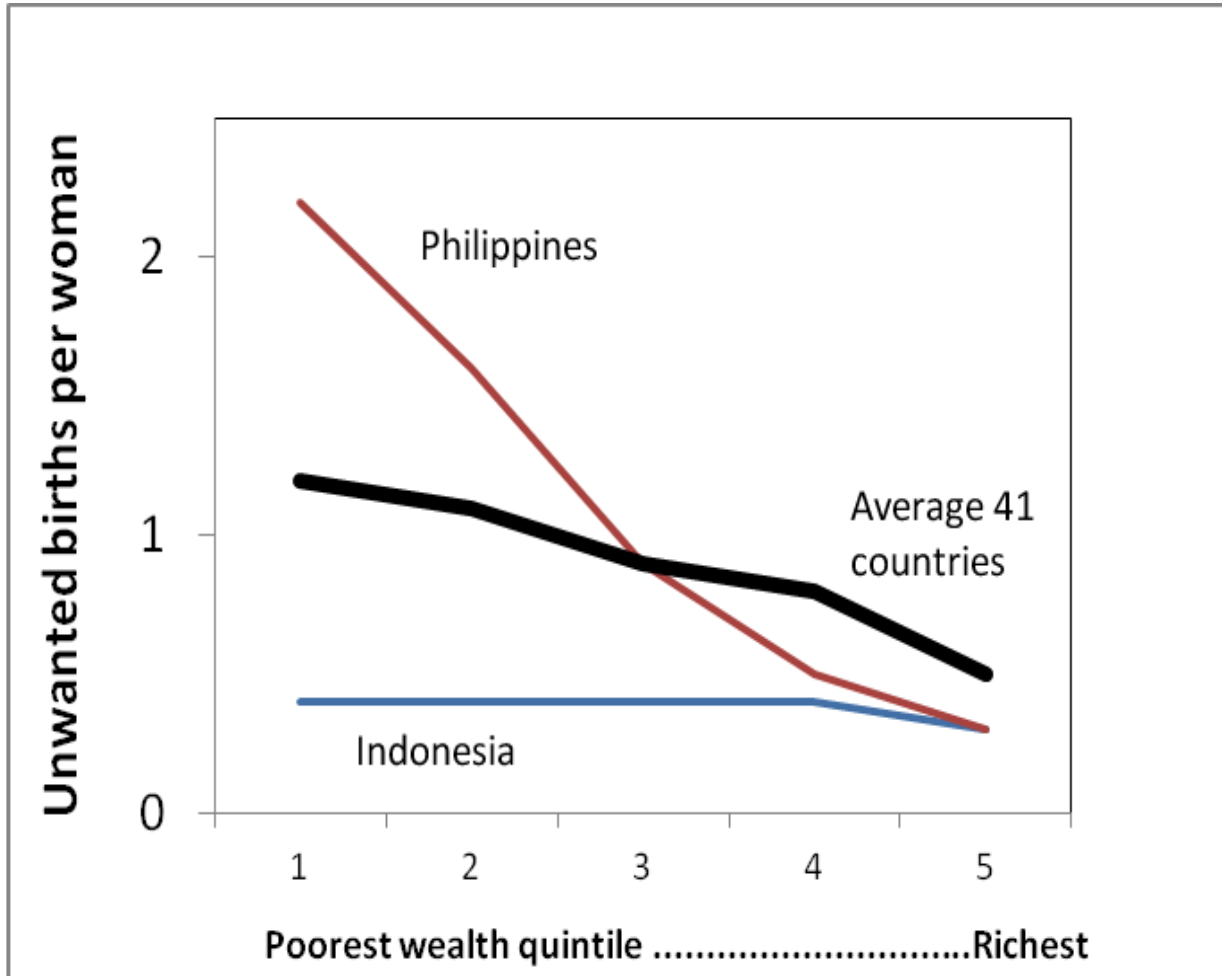
a) Increases female labour-force participation & earnings

- Toll on women's earnings
- Studies across the world show schooling and lifetime earnings increased by:
 - Giving young women access to family planning
 - Delaying first birth

b) Lowering physical & financial barriers to contraceptive access most help to the least disadvantaged women

- Poorer women typically report:
 - higher unmet need for family planning
 - higher numbers of unwanted children, except in settings with very effective family planning programmes
- Analyses of policy-related variation in access to contraception find:
 - access to contraception brings the most benefits to poor, less educated, and adolescent women

Unwanted fertility is higher among the poor, and effective family planning programs can reduce this gap



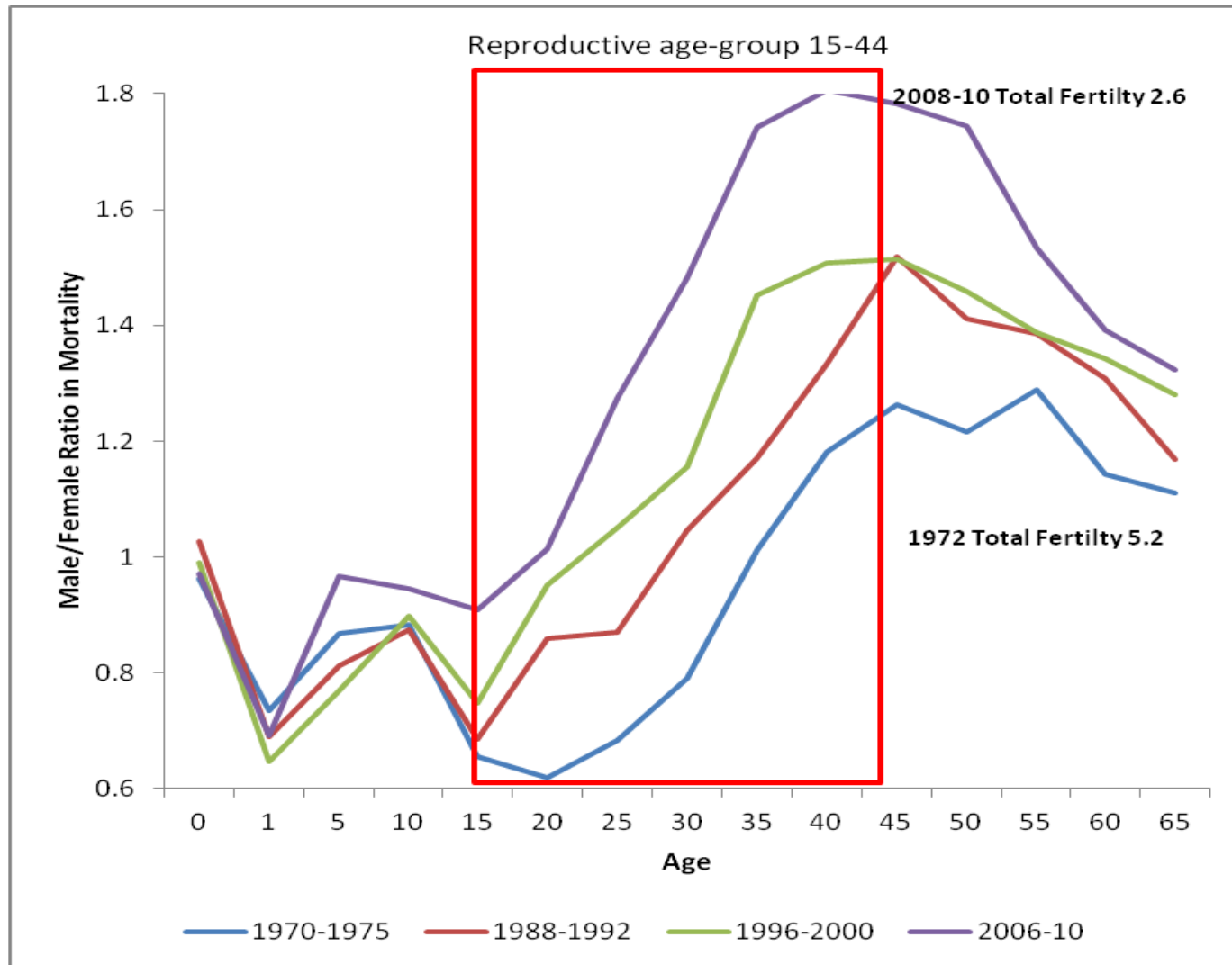
Source: Gillespie et al. (2007): Table 1

c) Lower fertility helps improve women's health

- Maternal mortality is a major cause of death for young women in high fertility settings.
Lowered by:
 - Better maternal health services
 - Lower fertility: fewer exposures to the odds of dying in childbirth
- Women's mortality risk remains elevated for long after childbirth

Fertility decline helps improve women's health

Women's Mortality fell faster than Men's, India 1972-2008



Source: Government of India, Sample Registration Bulletin 16(1), June 1982, and SRS Based Abridged Life Tables 1988-92, and 1996-2000, New Delhi: Registrar-General of India.

d) Lower fertility & birth planning enhances children's life chances

- Planning helps. Studies find:
 - greater investments are made in planned children
 - children's life chances are enhanced when their mothers have more control over birth timing
- “Resource dilution”: family size affects investment in children
 - Son preference adds to resource dilution

SECTION 2

WHAT CONSTRAINS WOMEN'S CONTROL OVER THEIR CHILDBEARING?

*... AND HOW CAN FAMILY PLANNING PROGRAMMES
MITIGATE THESE CONSTRAINTS?*

WOMEN'S PRIMARY ROLES OFTEN PERCEIVED TO BE DOMESTIC,
CONSTRAINED POWER TO DECIDE ON THEIR OWN CHILDBEARING

a) Low decision-making power in the household

- Young women often not primary decision-makers on childbearing:
 - husband or partner
 - mother-in-law and other in-laws may act as gate-keepers
- Where contraceptive use is not yet commonplace, this can be major barrier to contraceptive use:
 - women often more motivated than other decision-makers to control childbearing
 - low spousal communication
 - covert use of contraception by women
- Communication outreach can change norms of whole communities, reduce barriers to use

b) Limitations on mobility outside the home

- In some settings, women's mobility is a constraint
 - Family planning programs can ease access to reproductive health services by doorstep delivery
- When compounded by low literacy, women's access to information limited
 - but mass media reaches into their homes

c) Exposure to early childbearing

- Adolescent / early childbearing, due to :
 - traditions of child marriage
 - early initiation of sexual activity
- Limits women's empowerment:
 - lower school attainment and future earnings
 - exposes them to a longer duration of childbearing
- Making contraceptive information and supplies easily accessible to young women helps them avoid unwanted pregnancies
- Programs / financial incentives to keep girls in school & avoid pregnancy

CONCLUSIONS

Studies from across the world show **greater control over childbearing can quickly empower women** along several dimensions:

- *For women:* higher schooling, work prospects, lifetime earnings (and better health)
- *For their children:* more human capital, improved life-chances
- Helps most women who are poor/ less-educated

Helps break cycle of poverty for households and their children

While other efforts to empower women are long-term in impact, simple interventions in family planning programs can help, e.g.:

- Mass communication to reduce potential opposition by spouses/elders to women's use of contraception
- Ensure easy access to contraceptive information and supplies, especially for young women
 - e.g. mobile phones, social marketing, community-level service delivery
- Assure uninterrupted access to low-cost contraception, so women can avoid unwanted births