

How Have Fertility Declines Benefitted Women's Lives in Low- and Middle-Income Countries?

A Review of the Evidence



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Introduction

Fertility rates have declined substantially in many lower- and middle-income countries over the last 40 years due to changes in a wide range of social, economic and health factors. On average, individuals and families across the world now desire fewer children and experience greater access to reproductive information and services, including contraception, than in the past.

As a result of these changes, over the course of one or two generations, women in many countries have gone from having on average six or seven children in their lifetime to having only two or three. In addition, these changes have occurred at a time when young women in the family-building stage of their lives comprise a large share of the population in these countries. Any impact of this drop in fertility on women's ability to work, go

to school or make changes in most parts of their lives, are bound to have ripple effects throughout a society.

However, while there is evidence on the consequences of fertility decline in developing low and middle-income countries as it relates to health, public policy and economic growth, the implications of having fewer children on women's lives, their empowerment and on gender equality have largely been neglected.

Therefore, determining whether and to what extent fertility changes have affected women's lives is a crucial knowledge gap to fill. The Fertility & Empowerment (F&E) Network, a group of academic and applied researchers led by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), sought to address this issue. While there

is evidence suggesting that women's empowerment has contributed to fertility decline over time, researchers in the Network sought to understand the other side of the equation; that is, whether and to what extent fertility decline has contributed to women's empowerment.

Researchers hypothesized that fertility decline may also trigger further benefits to women's lives. Namely, with an increased lifespan and time spent outside of child-bearing as well as less societal emphasis placed on having large families, fertility decline may trigger changes in the roles that women play in their families, societies and communities. In turn, those changes could contribute to economic and social development, as well as improved gender relations and equality.



David Snyder

The benefits to women's lives that may result from fertility decline range from a direct influence on women's and girls' *well-being* (e.g. health, nutrition); to increases in women's *empowerment*, that is, the process by which women have an ability to make strategic life choices once denied to them; and finally, to *gender transformation*, or significant shifts in gender relations and equality across communities and societies.

Through a synthesis of the case studies conducted by F&E Network researchers, and additional research to ensure comprehensive coverage of the evidence base, ICRW found that the overall well-being of women and girls improves as fertility declines, particularly as it relates to their maternal health, educational attainment and workforce participation. ICRW also found that, in many contexts, fertility decline has contributed to the empowerment of women and girls. However, the evidence is less conclusive in demonstrating that fertility decline has led to improved gender relations and gender equality at the societal level.

The following provides highlights of our key findings.

Highlights of Key Findings

Women's and girls' health improves with fertility decline

Women who have fewer pregnancies are less likely to die during childbirth, more likely to live longer and to be healthier, overall. For instance, fertility decline in the developing world was responsible for averting about 1.7 million maternal deaths between 1990 and 2008. On the contrary, high maternal mortality rates persist in several countries in sub-Saharan Africa, which have experienced very slow fertility declines.

Further, when women give birth less often, their children's health and mortality also improve. With smaller families, parents can invest more in each child's health and development. However, whether this investment is equitably distributed between sons and daughters often depends on gender norms: In countries where there is not a strong preference for sons, parents' investments in their daughters and sons tend to be more equitable than in countries with strong son preference.

In populations with a history of strong preference for sons – such as China and India – fertility decline has actually *intensified* gender inequality as it relates to girls' well-being and survival. However, research indicates that this inequality is shifting in certain locales, perhaps signaling the beginning of real gender transformation in traditionally rigid, patriarchal societies.

Lower fertility can influence women's and girls' educational attainment

The evidence indicates strongly that educated women are more likely to have fewer children than those with little or no education. The evidence also suggests that the reverse is true as well: as fertility declines, parents invest more in their children, including in their education. Research supports the argument that this increase in children's education occurs as reductions in fertility trigger a shift in interest from the *quantity* of children to the *quality* of their development – particularly as families are drawn to the prospect of children securing high-skilled and well-paid jobs in increasingly market-based societies.

Our research found that fertility decline has had a more positive impact on girls' education than it has had on boys' education. For example, in an analysis of fertility and education trends in 33 countries, researchers found that the gender gap in secondary and higher education narrowed in most contexts, and reached parity in 12 of the 33 countries. A case study from China illustrates an example of these findings, showing that the gap in educational attainment between girls and boys narrowed as fertility declined over time. Gains in education, especially at the secondary level, contribute significantly to girls' overall well-being, and provide opportunity for their empowerment.

Education, however, does not always equate with empowerment, particularly when the quality of education is poor, where getting to and from school can be dangerous for girls, and where gendered expectations continue to hinder women's employment and progress in the labor market. A case study from Tehran, Iran, for example showed that with fertility decline, women experienced gains in their educational achievements, even after marriage. However, the same was not true in terms of their progress in the workforce, where women have made little inroads.

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Overall, ICRW's findings suggest that gains to women's education *alone* will not reshape gender relations. But when education is accompanied by other changes that increase a woman's ability to control her own destiny, it can indeed play an empowering and transformative role.

Having smaller families affects women's workforce participation

Women who spend less time on childbearing and childrearing live longer and are increasingly available for activities outside of the home – including pursuing and securing gainful employment.

Indeed, recent studies have begun to build a strong foundation of evidence indicating that fertility declines affect growth in women's labor supply and employment. In many countries, a rise in women's workforce participation can be a sign of increasing empowerment and gender equality. Women who work often have more mobility, decision-making power and financial autonomy. Women's increasing participation in the labor market, however, does not automatically imply that they will feel more empowered and their lives will improve. It may instead indicate that women are being stretched both in and out of the home, especially if gendered expectations at home do not shift. It may also suggest that women are struggling to make ends meet through informal, part-time and low-paid jobs.

To understand whether labor force participation is empowering, it is also important to consider *why* women are being given an opportunity to work, what kind of work they have access to, and whether they have control over their earnings. In fact, although a rise in women entering the labor market may be among the first consequences of fertility decline, it may be only in the following generations, through shifts in gendered work opportunities – that is, the recognition that women can perform an array of jobs and that male-dominated sectors are also open to them – and through investments in girls' education, that we observe meaningful changes in the kinds of work women can and do pursue.

Fertility decline's impact on gender roles in the home remains unclear

The important benefits to women's lives following fertility decline found in the public sphere through gains to education and employment do not necessarily pre-suppose parallel improvements in women's lives in the private sphere of the home. Indeed, as women's empowerment is multi-dimensional, women's position may progress in the public sphere long before entrenched gendered norms shift at the household level or within marriages and family relationships.

A dearth of evidence makes it difficult to draw strong conclusions about the relationship between fertility decline and gender norms and roles in the home. However, available research holds some promise, particularly in regard to how daughters are valued in the household. Case studies in Bangladesh and Darjeeling, India found that in the context of smaller families, and following investments in daughters' schooling, girls become recognized as potential sources of financial support to parents in their old age. This is particularly true as young women enter the labor force in unprecedented ways.

More work needs to be done to assess how demographic shifts may influence traditional gender roles. In the long run, gender transformation is likely to happen only when changes in education, employment and other spheres are matched by shifts in the gendered expectations of household roles and responsibilities.

Policy Implications

As fertility rates continue to fall, benefits to women's lives may be constrained unless policies can catalyze changes in gender norms and systems within and outside the domestic sphere.

Our work has enabled us to examine not just whether or not fertility declines have improved women's lives, but to what extent. The results suggest that fertility decline has led to increases in women's well-being specifically in regard to improvements in health and nutrition, education and employment. In some cases, it has also led to women's empowerment through increased educational and work opportunities. There is less evidence, as yet, of gender transformation, or broader changes to gender equality; however, we expected these changes to require more time to be realized.

Our findings also suggest that in many of the countries where fertility has recently fallen, gendered norms and roles, particularly within the domestic sphere, have not shifted alongside or following fertility decline, and continue to serve as significant barriers to women's empowerment. As one example, while women are now closing the gap in educational attainment, they remain held back by gender-discriminatory expectations around women working outside the home. We argue one important reason for this is that deeply entrenched inequitable gender norms and systems require additional triggers in order to shift; the consequences of inaction affect no less than the economic growth and development potential of these societies.

Shifting gendered norms and systems is complex, but by starting with changes in policies related to family laws, property rights, inheritance rules and child care policies, for example, it can take place. The seeds for change exist. Political will and smartly-designed gender-sensitive programs can help ensure a transformation of gender roles and norms that will enable societies to reap the full benefits of fertility decline, including the empowerment of women.

To read all the case studies and the full report that synthesizes the evidence, visit www.icrw.org/what-we-do/fertility-empowerment-network/research



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The Fertility & Empowerment Network

The Fertility & Empowerment (F&E) Network is a group of academic and applied researchers committed to reinvigorating the connection between gender, fertility decline and development through both theoretical and applied research. The F&E Network is housed at the International Center for Research on Women and funded by The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. The F&E Network aims to advance a research agenda on issues intersecting these three themes that is of interest to researchers and policymakers alike, and to support the professional development of experienced and emerging scholars with an interest in gender and population.

Fertility & Empowerment Network members have conducted a series of case studies addressing whether and to what extent fertility declines in lower and middle income countries have led to gains in women's well-being, women's empowerment or transformations to gender equality. The F&E Working Paper Series serves as a platform for the collective presentation of this rich body of work.

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