

Investigation of Reproductive History and Fertility Preferences: A Study of Rural Punjab: Pakistan

¹M. Iqbal Zafar, ¹Fawad Asif, ²M. Imran Khan and ²M. Shahbaz Bajwa
¹Department of Rural Sociology, ²Department of Mathematics and Statistics
University of Agriculture, Faisalabad, Pakistan

Abstract: The main objective of the study is to examine reproductive history and fertility preferences along with respondents' perceptions about ideal family composition, concept of small and large family. 360 women aged 25-45 years with at least one living child residing in the rural areas of three major districts of the Punjab province Lahore, Rawalpindi and Multan were interviewed. It emerged from the study findings that conceiving more than 6 or 7 times is a normal behaviour of women in the selected area. Desire for additional children reflects the existence of a preference for sons in the society. The respondents' had no clear concept regarding small and large families as promoting by the Government of Pakistan. It is concluded that women's health is at great risk due to the closely spaced repeated pregnancies, which they deliver, in unsafe environment under the supervision of traditional birth attendants. Attitudinal change regarding family size is a pre-requisite for the effective and efficient implementations of the family planning programme in the country.

Key Words: Pregnancies, Live Birth, Ideal Family Size, Concept, Small and Large Family, Family Planning

Introduction

It is a well-recognised fact in developing countries that children are considered to be important ingredients of a happy and normal life. The intensities and causes of having children are different in different societies according to their economic, political and socio-cultural structure. In the in-depth study the respondents emphasised that children are inevitable and indispensable. No participant desired to live childless. The responses of respondents pinpointed the importance of religious, moral, natural, social, familial and economic factors for having children.

There was a widespread belief that procreation is a natural, moral and religious obligation of couples. Respondents also believed that marital romance and sexuality is not only the purpose, but that the prime aim of marriage is procreation, which preserves the continuity of the family and society. The family concept is only understandable in terms of children, otherwise it is vague.

The literature review on the subject indicates that so many factors such as social, cultural, survival chance of children and economic influence the fertility decision making-process. Economic benefits such as old age security, financial contribution from children to their parents are reported in the economic theories of fertility (Easterlin, 1985). Caldwell (1976) also attaches the economic values for having many children and views other factors as secondary. The author presented the idea of intergenerational bargain: children provide labour or security to their parents and in turn expect the same from their children. Question arises among socio-cultural and economic factors which one factor is significant in shaping fertility behaviour in developing societies. Lee and Bulatao (1983) are of the opinion that economic value, whether positive or negative, varies across cultures, institutional settings, socio-economic classes as well as with the availability of agriculture land and other inputs complementary to labour and the state of technology.

With respect to net contribution in economic terms, the

exact calculation of children's contributions is a difficult task because the value of children activities varies widely with the local situation and with different numbers and characteristics of children (Potter, 1983). So, in different studies the assessment of net benefits of children to their parents in terms of economic support, old age security, labour on lands or help in enterprise based on the average economic contributions from their children. Lee and Bulatao in their review on the subject conclude that on average children have negative values in the peasant societies. The authors further state that if urban sectors in developing countries were taken into account, it appears more likely that result will be a negative economic value for children. The same fertility rates for urban and rural areas of Pakistan as well as for developed and less developed provinces reported in Pakistan Demographic Health Survey (1991) provide an indirect support to the idea that net flow of economic benefits from children to parents is not a matter of consideration. Fertility levels of urban centres remain lower than rural areas because children potential labour contribution is generally lower in urban areas with the increased opportunities for education (Arnold *et al.*, 1975). The insignificant impact of the costs-benefits approach on fertility behaviour in Pakistan (as clear from the same levels of fertility in urban and rural areas) in explaining fertility behaviour in Pakistan indicates that other aspects of the institutional setting are also potentially important. The persistent high level of fertility in Pakistan in the presence of limited opportunities for employment and smaller farms (encounter low returns to incremental labour) in Pakistan (Rukanuddin *et al.*, 1986) is another evidence in favour of cultural ideology in shaping fertility behaviour.

Objectives: The prime objective of the study is to explore the actual level of fertility (No. of live births and no. Of pregnancies), respondents' and their husbands' desire for more children, respondents' perceptions about ideal family size, ideal number of boys and no. of girls and along with their perceptions about the small and large family.

Materials and Methods

A well-structured interview schedule was constructed to investigate the reproductive history and fertility preferences. The present study is conducted in rural area of three major Districts –Lahore, Multan and Rawalpindi - of the Province Punjab to investigate the gender roles and relationships. These districts are among the most populated districts of the country. Lahore is 2nd and Rawalpindi is the 4th and Multan is the 5th district with respect to population size and these districts are situated far away from each other. Population situations of three districts present similar characteristics of size and development, making these areas suitable for this study. Significant differences are not expected in the cultural values regarding gender relationships because people's lifestyle of these districts is almost the same. Religion and language which are powerful forces influencing lifestyle of people (Hull, 1983) are the same in the areas. The main reason for the selection of three areas was to capture more variation and to increase the scope of the study from the viewpoint of generalization of the research findings. Although regional differences are not expected, but regional differences are investigated to verify the proposition that socio-demographic and cultural settings of the respondents of these districts are the same. Rural married fecund women of age 16-49 years with at least one living child were interviewed in this study.

Appropriate sample size is necessary to ensure the validity and reliability of the research findings. Keeping in view limited resources 120 respondents – married fecund women from each district were interviewed. Altogether 360 respondents were interviewed from the selected three districts to explore the objectives. From district Multan two tehsils – Shujabad and Multan were selected randomly and from each tehsil three villages were selected randomly to interview 120 respondents-20 respondents from each village. The selected villages from tehsil Multan were BastiBosan Mithar Billiwala and Joke Muhammad Khan Weins from Multan tehsil and Shahpur, Sikanderabad and Khaki Punjabi from Shujabad tehsil. From district Lahore the selected six villages were Ramkot, Sultankey, Mohniwal, Wara Gujranda, Nathokey and Atary and from Rawalpindi district the villages were Saroa, Chakry, hoha Khalsa, Sohra and Takhat Parri were selected. The village list published by Population Census Organisation based on the 1981 Population Census was taken as sampling frame for drawing the sample 360 respondents from the study area. Twenty eligible respondents from each village were identified through systematic random sampling. Where the eligible respondent was not found in the selected household, the next household was investigated for the identification of the eligible respondent.

Results and Discussion

The reproductive history was examined by asking the respondents' how many times they got pregnant and how many live children they had. Preferences for very large families are clearly emerged from the pregnancy history. Table 1 reveals that the majority of respondents had many pregnancies and conceiving more than five times seems normal behaviour of Pakistani women. Many studies have been identified adverse effects of closely spaced many pregnancies on the mother-child health. The analysis of pregnancy history reflects that there was a vast majority of the

respondents whose health is really at great risk because they had many close spaced pregnancies. Table indicates that 32 percent of the respondents, who had been pregnant six or more times, many of them were still in their fertile period. The respondents who had two to four pregnancies, were generally very young and it is highly likely that were conceive more times before reaching the limit of their childbearing years.

Table 1: History of Respondents' Pregnancies

No. of pregnancy	No. of respondents	Percentage
Two times	47	13.1
Three times	72	20.0
Four times	72	20.0
Five times	54	15.0
Six times	42	11.7
Seven times	30	8.3
Eight times	21	5.8
Nine times	9	2.5
Ten and higher	13	3.7
Mean pregnancies	5.05	
Standard deviation	2.36	

Life Time Fertility: Early childbearing in Pakistan is desired and valued and is connected with family respect and honour. The majority respondents expressed that early birth of a child confirms one's femininity and masculinity. The concept of woman's destiny, which lies mainly in her early procreation, is achieved through early childbearing. The Pakistani women achieve more respect and power by ensuring the continuity of the family line and by fulfilling the expectation of the in-laws. A woman also ensures her marital stability and reduces the fear of divorce by having children as early as possible. Early childbearing cancels the fear of permanent infertility, which is very dangerous for a woman in Pakistan. A childless woman is pitied and her future prospects are considered dark and bleak. Early childbearing is not only a woman's desire, but also that of her husband. This ensured the husband's self-image as a complete man in society. A childless man is often seen as indicative that he lacks manliness and could become the object of sympathy and ridicule.

Table 2 indicates that a considerable proportion of the respondents (46.3 %) had 5 or more children ever born and respondents who had less than four children were still in their peak age of childbearing as it is clear from the current age pattern and it is likely they will bear more children in future. A quite substantial portion of the respondents (20 %) who had 7 or more children were clearly at great health risk. The mean children ever born in the selected area was 4.77 with standard deviation 2.17 children. Since independence the country's population is growing enormously, sweeping all the Governments efforts for maintaining and achieving the socio-economic development.

Table 2: History of Life Time Fertility (children ever born)

No. of children	No. of the respondents	Percentage
2	47	13.1
3-4	144	40.0
5-6	96	26.0
7+	73	20.3
Mean children ever born	4.77	
Standard deviation	2.17	

Fertility Preferences: Disparities have been observed between respondents' desire for more children and their perceptions for their husbands' desire for more children. When it was asked from the respondents "do you and your husband want more children, a vast majority of the respondents (about 62 %) had no intention to have more children while 36.1 percent of the respondents perceived that their husbands have no such desire. About 42 percent of respondents perceived that their husbands have desire for more children and about 22 percent of the respondents were unaware or unsure about their husbands' desire (Table 3). The lack of spousal communication which is an indicator of reproductive health and of women status in the family and society (Zafar, 1995) is reflected from the study findings. It is also emerged from the higher level of actual fertility than the desired fertility that there are such forces, which make difficult for women to translate their desire into practice. Although childbearing is a biological phenomenon but it is not charming. Gestation period, complications of pregnancies which are linked with higher risk of death, labour pain and incompatibilities of rearing children with social and economic activities are not charming activities. The current age structure indicates that there was a vast majority of women who were in their peak age of reproduction and they had no desire for more children in future is an important finding for programme managers and policy makers. The consistent huge gap between the actual fertility (about 6 or more children) and desired fertility (about four children) since last four decades established the ineffectiveness of the family planning programme and Government's lack of commitment.

The reported ideal family size ranged from 2 to 8 children with high clustering at 3 to 4 (two boys and one girl or two boys and two girls). The mean ideal family size was about 4 with standard deviation 1.45. About 68 percent of the respondents reported 3 to 4 children as an ideal family while one fourth of the respondents desired to have five or more children indicating that preferences for very large family still prevail in rural Pakistani society. It is quite surprising to note that there was only a very small proportion of the respondents (3.1 %) who considered two children as their desired or ideal family.

Table 3: Distribution of Respondents According to their Desire for More Children

Desire	Wives		Husbands	
	No. of respondents	%	No. of respondents	%
Yes	121	33.6	150	41.7
No	223	61.9	130	36.1
Not sure	16	4.4	80	22.2

The preference for male children were different among the respondents varied according to their socio-economic circumstances and their openness to cultural ideology. Table 4 reveals that the preferred sons and girls were ranging from 1 to six with high clustering at two sons and two daughters. More than 58 percent of the respondents expressed two sons and two daughters as their ideal or desired family. 20.3 percent and 11.9 percent of the respondents stated that three and four or above respectively as ideal sons for their families. Kim and Choi (1981) also found the confirmation of boy preference in the Korean society. The

authors stated that the desire for another baby was much higher among women who had less than two sons. The son preference variable serves as an independent variable that has a direct causal effect on the ultimate family size. This desire was a real predictor to offer an explanation of fertility and contraceptive behavior, though after two sons, the differentials in contraceptive use were negligible.

Ahmad (1981) used more refined measures developed by Coombs (1976) and found the son preference and its association with use of contraceptives in Bangladesh. Data on the sex of a future child were gathered in the Pakistan and Bangladesh Fertility Surveys. In Bangladesh, about 60 per cent of currently married fecund women wanted their next baby to be a boy, while only 7 percent of women showed their desire for a girl. In Pakistan, 71 percent of currently married fecund women who were reported to want another baby, wanted to have boy, 5 percent a girl - 24 percent were undecided (Cleland *et al.*, 1983). Similar behaviour has been found in Jordan, Korea, Nepal and Syria. Nag (1991) examined different sets of data collected during a space of two decades from 1969 to 1988 for Pakistan, India and Bangladesh on stated desire to have additional children. The data clearly indicates widely prevalent preference for sons in all the three countries.

The mean desired number of sons and daughters was 2.38 and 1.67 respectively indicates preference of sons over daughters. Many respondents also expressed that although we have reported their desired family in numbers but really decisions about the number of children are not within the authority of human beings. Moreover, some respondents revealed that restrictions on the number of children are unacceptable from the Islamic viewpoint. God, who is the procreator, takes the decision about the number of children. In the in-depth study many firmly explained that there is no need to limit children from the fear of food shortage because God provides all the basic necessities of life. One respondent stressed that,

"It is not within the control of human beings to increase or decrease the number of children. To think about the issue is purely an unislamic action. The decisions about the number of children are taken by the Almighty Who has absolute power and also Who is creator and provider."

Perception for Large and Small Families: The concept of large and small families has been explored asking two questions from the respondents 'how many children make up a big family' and how many children make up a small family. The study findings reveal that the respondents had different perceptions regarding large and small families. Some considered three or four children as a large family while some believed six, seven, eight and even nine or above (Table 5). The concept of a large family in the selected area ranged from 3 to 12 children with a clustering at six. The vast majority of the respondents (71.3 %) perceived that a family with six or more children could be thought as a big or large family while in their view a family with four or five children could not be regarded as a large family. There was a small percentage of the respondents who correctly perceived the concept of a large family. 25.4 percent of respondents who perceived correctly a family with 4 or 5 children is a large family. It is clear from this study findings that concept of a large family what the Government wants to diffuse in the society still perceived by the society as a small family. The responses of the respondents on the concept of small

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family supported the above findings that rural people still perceive four or five children as a small family. Table 6 indicates that about 61 percent of the respondents reported that a family with 4 or 5 children is a small family. 18.9 percent of the respondents correctly perceived two children as a small family.

Table 4: Distribution of the Respondents According to their Desired Family Size

Desired family	No. of respondents	Percentage
Family		
Up to 2	11	3.1
3-4	246	68.3
5+	90	25.0
God knows	13	3.6
Mean desired family	4.04	Standard deviation 1.45
Boys		
1	12	3.3
2	219	60.8
3	73	20.3
4+	43	11.9
God knows	13	3.6
Mean desired boys	2.38	Standard deviation 0.98
Desired girls		
1	119	32.1
2	210	58.3
3+	18	5.0
God knows	13	3.6
Mean desired girls	1.67	Standard deviation 0.69

Table 5: Respondents' Response to the Question "how Many Children Make up a Big Family"

No. of children	No. of respondents	Percentage
Three	11	3.1
Four	44	12.2
Five	48	13.3
Six	108	30.0
Seven	61	16.9
Eight	88	24.4
Mean big family	6.32	
Standard deviation	1.67	

Table 6: Respondents' Response to the Question "how Many Children Make up a Small Family"

No. of Children	No. of respondents	Percentage
Two	68	18.9
Three	72	20.0
Four	172	47.8
Five+	48	13.3
Mean small family	3.60	
Standard deviation	1.05	

Conclusion

It emerged from the study findings that rural women are at great health risk due to the large number of closely spaced pregnancies, which they deliver, in unsafe environment under the supervision of traditional birth attendants exposing themselves to high risk of infection. Conceiving more than 6 or 7 times is normal behaviour of Pakistani women which has resulted in enormous population growth. Desire for additional children reflects the existence of a preference for sons in the society because the mean desired sons was greater than the mean desired daughters. The

respondents' perceptions regarding small and large families were not in accordance with the Government's concept of small and large families. What the respondents perceived a family with four or five children is a small family basically is a large family while a family with six, seven or eight children is a very large family but the respondents perceived it as a large family. Study findings reveal a huge gap between actual and desired fertility and misconception about small and large families indicating the programme's ineffectiveness. The findings attract the attention of population planners towards effective diffusion of the concept of small and the large family in the society because attitudinal change regarding family size is a pre-requisite for the effective and efficient implementations of the family planning programme in order to achieve the improved women health status for sustainable development.

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