

Changing ideal family size in Egypt:
a dynamic analysis of the young generations

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Long abstract prepared for the European Population Conference

to be held in Padua on 24-27 June 2020

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Abstract

Several Arab countries have experienced an unusual fertility increase in recent years. In Egypt fertility declined very slowly after 2000 and the trend reversed in the period from 2008 to 2014. In this paper, we aim to understand Egyptian fertility patterns looking at the determinants of ideal family size. The desire for a smaller family size is an important factor in the fertility transition process. Using the reports of the young generations (men and women aged 15 to 29 years) interviewed in different points in time, 2009 and 2014 (Survey of Young People in Egypt), we run a multinomial logistic regression on the change of ideal family size. Knowing the determinants of changing ideal family size is a key for assessing the future fertility patterns of Egypt. Moreover, our emphasis on ideals is justified by the recent target settled by the Egyptian Government aimed at reducing ideal family size.

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Introduction

In Egypt, fertility declined very slowly after 2000 and started to increase again between 2008 and 2014. Estimates of United Nations document an increase from 3.0 children in 2005 to 3.5 children in 2015. The trend on increase has been attributed to the anticipation of childbearing of young women, or alternatively, to an increased religiosity (Courbage 2015), nonetheless the steady increase in young women's educational level (Assaad 2015). The high level of completed family size is sustained by the difficult labour market situation, which might encourage women to go for childbearing before starting to work or rather than working. Indeed, lack of jobs for women in the public sector and inadequacy of private (formal and informal) employment sector have pushed young married couples to have children earlier than usually seen in the country as family has a strong foundation in Egyptian society.

Nowadays, the family model of three children is still widespread in Egypt; this is the result of a desire for large families, which is still pervasive in the country. The Egyptian Government has recently settled a target aimed at reducing ideal family size (Awadalla 2017). The desire for a smaller family size is an important precondition of declining fertility. According to the ready, willing and able model, fertility declines if the decision to have a child enters in the calculus of a conscious choice, couples consider convenient a smaller family size and they are able to access contraception in order to avoid pregnancy. However, the Ideal family size reflects a societal norm evolving together with other major societal changes (Sobotka and Beaujouan, 2014). With this study we want to investigate whether such a sign of societal change is emerging through the preferences among the young generations.

Research questions

The research questions are:

- 1) Is the ideal family size changing over time among the young Egyptian generations? In other words, keeping constant the age groups do we observe any substantial change in such age groups across time, and more precisely between 2009 and 2014?
- 2) Is ideal family size changing when the generations get older, that is, along their life course? In other words, do the preferences expressed at the first wave of the survey (2009) change when the same young people are re-interviewed a few years later, at the second survey wave (2014)?
- 3) Are cross-generation changes more significant than cross-age changes?
- 4) Are the cross-generation and the across-age changes more relevant among women or among men?

Answering these questions is of paramount importance to understand the factors driving the increase in fertility levels observed in Egypt between 2005 and 2015 and the stalled fertility transition registered in the country. The analysis is expected to give an original contribution to the existing literature in the field especially because lies on a longitudinal study, which is very seldom in the area of developing countries, and it makes a strong focus on the young generations who are usually the vanguard of a change in childbearing attitudes and behavior.

Overview of the literature

Several studies have addressed ideal family size in low fertility countries (Sobotka and Beaujouan 2014, Philipov and Bernardi 2011, Ware 1974, Trent 1980): since the end of the Seventies the Committee of Population and Demography of the National Academy of Sciences – led by Ansley Coale - developed a wide discussion about fertility determinants in developing countries, where high fertility was responsible of sustained population growth. Bongaarts, Bulatao and Lee (1983) proposed that prospective family-size desires are the most appropriate measures of fertility demand. Additionally, Thomson and Brandreth (1995) stressed that intended or expected births reflect the combined effect of fertility demand and situational constraints on achieving desired fertility, being therefore paramount to the assessment of the need for family planning services (Westoff and Bankole, 2002). According with this view, Hermalin (1983) found empirical evidence that the comparison between the desired or ideal number of children and the actual number of living children can inform about the existence of motivations to control fertility.

During the following decades several studies have addressed the topic of ideal family size in developing countries: many of them have found a link between women' fertility preferences and subsequent contraceptive or fertility behavior in many developing countries (Koenig et al 2006). Additionally, it has been stressed that the relationship between fertility behavior and family-size desires may be post-hoc rationalization of actual fertility (McClelland 1983; Easterlin 1973; Bongaarts 1990, 2013).

In developing countries, changing ideals of family size have been associated with societal changes characterizing demographic transition such as increasing women education, decrease in child mortality and increase in the contraceptive prevalence rate (Snow et al. 2013). According to Jejeebhoy (1995) the effect of education on fertility depends on the socio-economic and cultural situation, on the level of development and on gender norms of each society. Education and more specifically female education is recognized as a fundamental factor in fertility transition as it changes gender norms and it makes women more autonomous (Dyson and Moore 1983). However also male education and more in general, male characteristics have an impact on fertility decrease (even if less clear compared to female education): because marriage and reproductive choices are supposed to be taken together by both men and women. Changing women behavior and attitudes toward marriage and the family are accompanied by changing men behavior in the same fields (Basu 1999).

Recent data confirm that the intention to have children is universal among young Egyptians aged 15-29 (Sieverding & Elbadawy, 2010). About 75% young women indicated two or three children as the ideal number of children a couple should have. Ideal fertility was generally somewhat higher among those in rural areas and Upper Egypt, as well as among the less-educated and poorer respondents. Moreover, data from Egyptian surveys outline the influence of traditional values of women's family of origin (Gebel and Heyne, 2014).

DHS surveys covering the period 1988-2014, provide information on the ideal number of children for ever-married women aged 15-49 in Egypt. Previous studies of Eltigani (2003; 2009) using such data for the period 1998-2000 show that the estimates of women's mean ideal family size since 1988 are consistently closer to three than to two children. The Author found that interestingly, during the period 1998-2000, women's preference for smaller families became universal in Egypt among all socio-economic segments (low, middle and high standard households). The ideal family size preferred by married women from the three strata is nearly identical, at approximately 3 children for the 12 years between 1998 and 2000. In particular,

childbearing preferences of married women from low standard households became increasingly similar to those of women from high standard households.

Among the determinants of the ideal number of children in the Egyptian context, a strong impact of place of residence and differential effects of modernization and social development at the community level were found both by Cochrane et al. (1990) (who used EFS data) and by Baschieri (2007) (who used DHS data).

A recent study of Ambrosetti et al. (2019) stressed that during the period 1988-2014, the ideal number of children of Egyptian ever married women remained stable around 3. The authors did not find relevant differences in the ideal number of children by background characteristics of women: in all the surveys there was a positive association between the ideal number of children and women's age, moreover the mean ideal number of children was higher among women in rural areas, but the difference between urban and rural areas was increasingly small. Furthermore, the comparison between the cohorts of women aged 15-24 in 2008 and 2015, outlined an overall increase in the preference for larger family, regardless education and place of residence. In this period, the shift from 2 to 3 children seems to be ubiquitous, confirming that the reversal of the trend is present even among the youngest generations.

Data and methods

We use two follow-ups of the survey of Young People in Egypt conducted in 2009 and 2014 by the Population Council. A sample of 15,029 young people aged between 10 and 29 years were interviewed at national level. The survey contains data on five key issues in the transition to adulthood: work, family formation, reproductive health, civic and political participation.

The big advantage of this survey in respect with the Demographic and Health Surveys is that it is a longitudinal study and allows us to follow individuals over their young adulthood life course segment. The survey questionnaire includes a specific section on Family Formation and Health in which questions on ideal family size are asked. The wording of the most important question item is: *“What do you think is the ideal number of children to have?”*. As possible responses, the interviewed people are asked to indicate a number of children considering separately girls and boys as well as the total, or explicitly indicating that there is no distinction between girls and boys (either, or option). This question has been addressed to both single and married women and men and, in case of married people, the individual has been asked to report also the opinion of the spouse and to declare whether any discussion or disagreement on this issue has raised within the couple. The wording of the related items is as follows: *“Have you and your husband ever discussed the issue of how many children you would like to have?”* and *“Is he in agreement with you about the number of children to have, or not?”*

Questions on ideal family size will be analyzed in conjunction with questions related to preferences related to the educational attainment, the work/employment condition, migration, and housing conditions. The related question items are as follows: *“What level of schooling would you like to finish?”* for educational attainment; *“Would you like to continue in this work or not?”* for employment conditions; *“Do you intend to travel to any country to work/live/study?”* *“in case of migrating, would you be willing to work in jobs that differ from your current specialization or education?”* for migration; *“Would you accept to live with your in-laws ”* for housing. This last question has been asked only to married couples.

We run multinomial logistic models using a 3-categorical variable indicating whether the ideals are on increase, decrease or stable. As a set of explanatory variables, we include age of both partners, marital status, educational attainment, employment status, dwelling, religiosity, health condition, and level of trust. Models are run separately by parity distinguishing those who have already children from those who are still childless. Another stratification criterion considered will be the marital status; singles being analyzed separately from married individuals. Whenever possible the explanatory variables will be computed by combining the characteristics of both partners, like for example age, which is known from both partners within a couple.

Expected results

We expect to find out a decrease of ideal family size in the young generation between the two survey waves. This result will lend support to the demographic explanation of the increasing fertility levels observed in the period of study. This interpretation based on the anticipation of births will be corroborated by the socio-economic conditions of that period in the country.

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