

# Fertility and birthrate before wwi history essay



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Period before World War I observed a remarkable fall in fertility in developed economies. The birth-rate began to fall about 1870 and declined steadily till 1914. There was a marked decline in the number of live births experienced by each married women in the population from an average of nearly six to an average of just two (Grebenik, 1949).

On the other hand, there has been a gradual fall in fertility in the less developed countries starting from China.

### **Fall in fertility in developed economies before World War I.**

The unfruitful years of the 1914-18 war and the instant subsequent productive years were a temporary disturbance which distracted attention from what was happening. In England, for marriages formed in the 1890s and later there was a considerable decline in gross fertility levels, and for this reason a dramatic slow down of population growth rates (Clark & Cummins, 2008).

The decline in fertility was pointed out as an issue that held back the evolving population growth, not only in Britain but also in western and central Europe. In fact, women in developed economies began to give birth to fewer children from the 1870 onward.

In most European countries, starting from Italy and finishing with Sweden, without Iberia and the eastern parts, in 1870 the number of children per woman was around five. In 1910 however, this number had fallen to between three and four, and to less than three in England (Borodkin et al. n. d.). An exceptional case was France, where in 1870 the average number of children

of a French woman was 3.4, and in 1910 it had decreased to 2.25 (Bacci 2000, p. 136).

## **Reasons for the fall in fertility in developed economies before World War I**

In developed economies such as Western Europe the reason for the fall in fertility was because of delayed marriage of women, forgone marriage. Most importantly due to the fact that individuals tried hard to make sure that families would not start their life in deficiency.

Table 1 presents an index of the percentage of women of childbearing age, who were married, from the European Fertility Project (Coale and Watkins 1986).

Source: Coale & Watkins 1986

A value of 5 means that only 50 percent of women between 15 and 49 were married. Estimates in the table were calculated approximately and arranged in descending order by their values in 1900. When analyzing the table it can be seen that the lowest values were in Northwestern Europe, and Mediterranean countries tended to be in between. Furthermore, there are two countries that fell behind the first one is France and the second one is Ireland. When it comes to France, it is among Spain and Italy, with the highest proportion of women married of any country in Northwestern Europe. On the other hand, Ireland had the lowest proportion married in all of Europe in 1900, even though it was overtaken by Iceland in previous years. It can be concluded that from the late 18th century a continual drop in fertility commenced in France, furthermore, fertility declines became common in

western and central Europe and in English speaking countries till the last quarter of the 19th century (Caldwell & Caldwell, 2001).

The reason behind slow population growth in France was due to very low marital fertility resulting from early adoption of birth control. In Ireland however, marital fertility stayed high but marriage was very late and it was common to live in celibacy. In Britain there was a constant and effective battle, led by the medical profession, to preserve the Victorian spousal relationship from the morally corruptive impact of the discussion and practice of contraception (Caldwell , 1999).

Another reason for the fall in fertility in developed economies such as north-west Europe before World War I was due to social pattern. The social pattern of late marriage by woman combined with a large percentage not ever marrying was known as the European Marriage Pattern. Family formation in western Europe was unusual in comparison with much of the rest of the world in the first marriage for women being delayed until around 25 years old with a substantial proportion of women never marrying, 10 percent and in involving the creation of separate households (Hajnal 1965). This pattern was very distinctive in pre-industrial societies (Hajnal 1965). Malthus (1826) argued that the prosperity of north-west Europe was based on using the preventive check on population growth through marriage choices. It was also thought that the fertility limitation of north-west Europe reflected a more individualistic, rational society where men and women realized the costs of high fertility and took steps to avoid it.

Furthermore, another driver responsible for decline in fertility after 1870 was a general rise in human capital investments in children leading to a desire for quality and not quantity.

Child education, women's opportunity cost of time and formal market participation were negatively related to fertility, reflecting substitution from numbers of children (time intensive) to fewer, more educated children (less time intensive) as opportunity costs rise.

In other words, higher education and wages of the parents must have led to changes in preferences towards higher "quality" children. Since higher quality children are very costly, this resulted in increasing the price of having an additional child, hence lower fertility.

As a result fertility levels had begun their decline to modern levels, education levels were rising, and human capital investments were becoming more important.

### **Fall in fertility in less developed economies in the late twentieth century.**

During the twentieth century there was a gradual fall in fertility in less developed economies such as Asia, North Africa, Latin America, due to national family planning programmes that were established there. The Latin American fall in fertility began at about the same socioeconomic and demographic level as the fall in the West. The opposition of the Catholic church to contraception meant that Latin America had few national family planning programmes and individuals had doubts about using contraceptives. Nevertheless, the national family planning programme was

principally from Asian and the greatest successes were in Asia. Therefore, falls in fertility in most of the larger countries of Asia (India, China, Bangladesh, and Indonesia) began at lower socioeconomic and demographic levels, thanks to massive national family planning programmes and the message that using contraception was good. As a result the decline in fertility in less developed countries has been viewed as the positive result of tendency long encouraged by local governments, most of which taken on family planning programs in the 1960s and 1970s with this outcome in mind (Jones and Leete 2002).

### **The reasons for the fall in fertility in the less developed economies in the late twentieth century.**

One of the reasons for the fall in fertility in the less developed economies in the late twentieth century was to avoid mass starvation. In the 1960s Chinese government officials concluded that the only option to mass starvation was strict population control. In order to drop the fertility level down first of all the government provided each married couple with free sterilization, contraceptives and abortion. Second of all, China established the most widespread, interfering and strict family planning and population control program in the world. The aim of this program was to discourage premarital sex and push people to delay their marriage and finally to limit their families to one child each. All married couples who assured the government that they will have only one child were rewarded. The rewards were: larger pensions, free health care, salary bonuses, more food, free school tuition for their child and preferential employment opportunities for

their child. On the other hand all married couples who broke their promise were not entitled to any of those benefits.

Possibly the most important reason for the fall in fertility was a build up in the West and among the elite populations in the Third World of the view that fertility control was essential and good and that contraception was highly regarded and could be openly talked about. The media and Western universities played an important part in educating those who governed developing countries or advised those who governed. The developing world's educational levels had risen and that was the reason for the fall in fertility. By 1965, over 80% of the children of the relevant age groups were in primary schools and 20% in secondary schools. Young parents were more media conscious and far more conscious of the cost of schooling. The global economy was forming, and the prospect of children getting employment in the modern sector of the economy made parents determined to keep their children in school even if the cost could be met only by limiting family size which is low fertility.

Another reason for the fall in fertility in the less developed economies was to foster savings and investments for economic growth. When the money was invested in health and education, families were able to use this as an opportunity to move out of poverty.

Fertility decrease was due to emphasize on human development particularly education raising women's status and improving child health. Education particularly of girls has shown to be a factor most closely related to fertility decline. By delaying marriage and first births. Increasing equality between

the sexes in legal , economic and social affairs raises the cost of children by making roles other than childbearing more feasible and attractive to women.

## **Similarities between the fall in fertility in developed economies before World War I and the reasons for its fall in the less developed economies in the late twentieth century.**

### **Quality and quantity**

The tradeoff between quality and quantity was very important in developed economies before World War I and in a developing country such as India, where there was neither a well-functioning public education system nor generous support for childbearing and childcare. As a result the cost of child quality was mostly borne by the parents. Furthermore, increased education for women did not always lead to greater participation in the labour market but lead to greater productivity at home through higher capital investment in the child in the form of more schooling and better health. Consequently, this higher investment (quality) increased the cost of having an additional child and lead to a fall in the demand for children (quantity).

### **Delays in marriage**

Encouragement of late marriage had a modest but important role in reducing China's fertility, especially in the 1970s and 1980s. One study estimated that the rise in age at marriage accounted for 8 percent of the reduction in the number of births between 1950 and 1970 and 19 percent of the reduction between 1971 and 1980, avoiding about 100 million births between 1950 and 1979 (Coale et al. 1991 p 390). The late twentieth century trend suggested that some countries in less developed economies may face a situation where 15 percent or more of women will remain single at the end of



their reproductive years. Such figures are not unknown historically in the Western Europe. Under the western European delayed marriage pattern discussed by Malthus before, 10-20 percent of women remained single at the end of their reproductive period in most countries around 1900 (Hajnal 1965; Therborn 2004).

## **Birth control**

Birth control was introduced to developed economies after 1870 because before that it was restricted to higher social classes. All this changed after 1870 when developed economies underwent the fertility transition. After that transition the fertility of women of childbearing age declined by over 60 per cent between the years 1880 and 1930. Information about available forms of birth control techniques was more accessible to the general public than ever before. This declining birth rate was mostly due to the embracement of birth control within the marriage. Similar situation happened in the less developed economies in the late twentieth century. Due to the introduction of the family planning programmes such countries like China who initiated that experience sharp drop in fertility level. Furthermore, the first modern intrauterine device, the Lippes loop, became available, and then oral contraception. Suction abortion was developed. In India and elsewhere more doctors added tubectomies to their previous skills in performing vasectomies and many were trained in laparoscopy. These were the main methods used by all the successful family planning programmes in large Third World countries. As a result by 1970 it was clear that there had been a widespread fall in fertility from about 1965 in both Latin America and Asia.

## **Conclusion**

The reasons for that were threefold, firstly birth control, techniques controlled by women, which were independent of sex. Secondly, late marriage where on average the women was between 24-26. Finally, choosing between little investment in human capital or 'child quality'. Consequently, the reasons for the fall in fertility in developed economies before World War I and the reasons for its fall in the less developed economies in the late twentieth century can be compared as they turned out to be very similar.