



Munich Personal RePEc Archive

# **The Consequences of the Demographic Transition for Women's Status in Society**

Martin Namasaka

The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)

15 January 2015

Online at <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/61296/>

MPRA Paper No. 61296, posted 16 January 2015 11:20 UTC

# **The Consequences of the Demographic Transition for Women's Status in Society**

**Martin Namasaka**

## **Abstract**

The demographic transition is perhaps the most important event to occur in human affairs during the last 250 years, since the time of the enlightenment. It started in the countries of north-western Europe, and it has gone on to affect the rest of the world (Dyson 2009). Signified by the sustained decline in mortality and subsequently fertility, it has major implications for women's status within the family and in the society as women become less tied to concerns of the domestic domain. Consequently, the process of the transition, presents an interesting reduction in gender differentiation (Davis, Van den Oever, 1982) with women's lives becoming more like those of men, rather than the reverse. This paper discusses the consequences the transition for women's status in both high and low fertility populations by presenting evidence that women gain from the process, however this by no means the end of the story in improvements to issues such as gender equality.

Firstly, as Nora Fererici, Karen Oppenheim Mason and Solvi Sogner (1995) pointed out, after the aftermath of the American and French revolutions and the movement towards democracy a new ideology of equality between sexes developed. The centrality of women's status and gender equality to the demographic transition was brought to the fore at the 1994 Cairo Conference on Population and Development, and much of the research and policy debates that followed. The progress of the transition has key benefits for women which relate to the reduction in fertility. Traditionally, during the pre-transition, the average woman would have 6 live births during her lifetime, which was significantly shorter. As such a huge portion of her lifetime would be related to pregnancy, lactation and childcare (Dyson 2001). On the other hand, in post transitional society a woman can expect to have 2 children. In this regard, children occupy a much smaller proportion of her life, which is much longer.

Similarly, Presser (2001) emphasizes the advantages of women's ability to control the timing on numerous births. This has been seen in the case of Kenya, India and Peru where fertility has fallen among younger women indicating the increasing control of marital fertility through the use of contraception and increasing delayed childbearing through the rising age of female marriage. However, Dyson (2001) argues that the fertility transition is accompanied by a fundamental weakening of the institution of marriage as women choose to marry later, not to marry at all, or to separate from their spouses. In many parts of Asia in particular, these trends are already apparent; in South Korea, Thailand and Malaysia (Kirsty McNay, 2003)<sup>1</sup>.

The current rise of female participation in the labour force outside the domestic sphere denotes a positive consequence of the demographic transition in their status. Notable examples include the US, where the fraction of women at work increased from 35% to over 65% in the postwar period. Part of this upward tendency for women to work more hours is due to the decline in birth rates. However, other factors, such as the development of the service sectors, the introduction of female contraceptives, the cultural impact of WWII and the 1960s, the reduction in child-care costs, and technological progress in the household, are those credited to explain the bulk of changes in female participation. Interestingly, the South is catching up quickly with the North: for example, if we consider the average between Brazil, India, Mexico and Korea, female participation rates were below 20% in 1950 and climbed to 40% in 2000. (Attanasio, O., S. Kitao and G. Violante (2005).

Overall, these cases support the view that there is a correlation between fertility decline and the expansion of women's non-domestic roles. However, it is equally important to note that

---

<sup>1</sup> Women's changing roles in the context of the demographic transition

there is not an automatic association as many factors may tamper with the relationship. For example, Mhloyi and Mapfumo (1998) find that in Zimbabwe, one of sub-Saharan Africa's most demographically advanced countries, women's opportunities in economic, social, and political spheres remain extremely limited despite fertility decline and improvements in female education (Kirsty McNay, 2003).

Secondly, there are numerous caveats of fertility decline in relation to women's status in the society. Borrowing from research, in countries or a family setting that has preference for sons, girls with older siblings are particularly vulnerable to parental discrimination in terms of survival-related resources such as health care (Das Gupta 1987). In China, the coercive one-child family policy has further magnified the conflict parents face between family size and desired number of sons. These fertility declines also coincide with a widening of methods parents may use to discriminate against daughters. In this kind of contexts then, fertility decline may mean that girls are increasingly disadvantaged even before birth.

In countries like South and East Asia, fertility decline occurred despite continued preference for sons (Amin and Lloyd 2002; Croll 2002). In South Asia dowry marriages are now seen as the sophisticated thing to do, and appear to be spreading to places and groups where they have not previously existed (Basu 1999). The adverse implications of this trend for the desirability of daughters are clear. Fertility transitions of this sort suggest the need to move away from the view that improvements in female status and declines in the preference for sons are necessarily either prerequisites for or outcomes of fertility decline. They also illustrate that we cannot assume that improvements in women's position for example their rising participation in the labour force, easily translate into improvements in girls' position.

Furthermore, even if the demographic transition facilitates expansion of women's roles in non domestic activities, women's tasks in the domestic sphere increasingly confront a double burden of work as the transition progresses. Domestic roles include bearing and rearing children and caring for other dependents such as the elderly who form larger portions of the population as a result of mortality decline. In this view, the process of ageing ushered in by the demographic transition may not therefore augur well for women and their households facing increasing elderly care burdens.

Thirdly, ageing and the position of the elderly women equally features in the demographic transition. In developing countries elderly women are often the most vulnerable as they confront multiple disadvantages associated with both age and gender. Noting that they lack the characteristics that provide incentives for younger family members to look after them (Malhotra and Kabeer 2000). There is a higher incidence of chronic poverty among older

women than older men (UNFPA 1998:2000). Their chances of widowhood are further enhanced because women tend to marry men older than themselves and are less likely to remarry following the death of a spouse (UNFPA 1998).

By contrast, the demographic transition may well provide increasing opportunities for elderly women to assume importance in the family; younger women's lower fertility and associated greater labour force participation may mean that families increasingly value the presence of an older woman look after grandchildren (Randel et. al. 1999). UNFPA (1998) cites work that shows that in the Philippines; almost 93 per cent of the elderly regularly care for a grandchild. However, although an increasing care-giving role may benefit older women in some circumstances, the elderly are sometimes overburdened with care responsibilities, and they confront specific problems as carers. For example, caring for adult children with HIV/AIDS and grandchildren orphaned by the disease often leads to desperate situations for both carers and dependants.

The evidence presented thus far supports the idea that women's rights have generally improved. As noted by Lesthaeghe (1995) who mentions that the transition has been driven by women's rights movements and increased focus on individual autonomy. The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, equally recognized that women's literacy is key to empowering women's participation in decision making in society and to improving families' well-being. In addition, the United Nations has articulated the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which include goals for improved education, gender equality, and women's empowerment. A classic example of this shift in women's rights is the case of Dr James Miranda Barry, A woman who disguised herself as a man and lived her entire life as man in order to be able to practice as a British arms Surgeon. Women now have the ability to access the education and the rights to practice such careers in the medical and army field.

Historical circumstances are also a good illustration of the changing roles of women's position in the society as a result of the demographic transition. For example, in 1893 and 1919 where women in New Zealand and the United States respectively, were given the right to vote respectively. Consequently, women in Britain over the age of 30, meeting certain property qualifications, were finally given the right to vote in 1918, and in 1928 this was extended to all women over the age of 21. Significantly, this kind of evidence indicates that women gain from the demographic transition and that gender differentiation is reduced. Furthermore, their increased independence affects society at the familial level in that there is less reliance on males for income and to take care of them.

In conclusion, women's roles and position in facilitating the demographic transition has been extensively studied as opposed to the reverse relationship, the consequences of the demographic transition for women's position in the society especially in developing countries such as the Sub-Saharan Africa which is projected to have the highest young population by 2050. Undoubtedly a majority of women seem to have gained from the demographic transition

with the fertility decline being associated with increased freedom to participate in education and employment. However not every woman may not share in the positive gains of the demographic transition because of factors such as economic circumstances. For example, Lloyd and Gage-Brandon's (1994) work in Ghana suggests that in a constrained economic environment in which parents face the cost of educating their children, older girls' education suffers when there are younger brothers and sisters around; these girls are less likely than boys to be enrolled in school and are more likely to drop out as they are called on to help rear their younger siblings.

Unfortunately, women confront a double burden, because they of the lion's share of responsibility for the care of dependents as well as their expanding non-domestic roles. In general, admittedly the demographic transition has a positive role to play in enhancing women's position in the family and in the society. However in trying to assess its implications it on women's roles, it is important to take account of life-cycle factor, social-economic and cultural context in which demographic transition is taking place as well as the nature and the stage of the transition.

## References

Attanasio, O., S. Kitao and G. Violante (2005) *Global Demographic Trends and Social Security Reform*”, mimeo, NYU.

Federici, N. et al. (1993) Women's Position and Demographic Change, Oxford, Clarendon Press, (especially chaps 1-3).

Gould, W.T.S (2008) *Population and Development* (Routledge Perspectives on Development).

Lesthaeghe R. (1995) 'The second demographic transition in western countries', in K. Oppenheim Mason and An-Magritt Jensen (eds) Gender and Family Change in Industrialized Countries, Oxford University Press. **E-book**

Lewis, J. (2002) The End of Marriage? Individualism and Intimate Relations.

Mahmud, S. and A. Johnstone (1994) 'Women's Status, Empowerment, and Reproductive Outcomes', in G. Sen et al. (eds.) Population Policies Reconsidered, Cambridge, Harvard School of Public Health

McNay, K. (2005) 'The implications of the demographic transition for women, girls and gender equality: A review of developing country evidence', in Progress in Development Studies 5(2): 115-34.

Paxton, Pamela. (2000): Women's suffrage in the measurement of democracy: Problems of operationalization. *Studies in Comparative International Development* 35.