

## **Explaining the fertility decline**

It is not surprising that fertility decline in Pakistan has finally begun. What is surprising is that it took so long to begin, that it seems to have begun so abruptly, and that it has proceeded—apparently, thus far—so rapidly. Although detailed discussion of these issues is beyond the scope of this note, the decline shown in Figure 1 calls for explanation, and some impressionistic sketching may be useful in anticipation of future research.

Fertility decline during the demographic transition occurs because families come to regard increasing numbers of surviving children as a problem and adopt family limitation as a solution. In a peasant agrarian society, the advantage to parents of surviving children for employment within the family declines as the number of children increases, particularly as population growth limits availability of agricultural land. Awareness of limited land in Pakistan would have become acute as a result of the massive influx of migrants following partition and of the many large irrigation projects intended to open new land to cultivation. At the same time, the development of labor markets and the rise of nonagricultural employment raise the value of educated children who enter the wage economy and remit some of their income to the family.

At some point the objective balance shifts in favor of smaller numbers of better-educated children. Wider exposure to mass media and rising literacy facilitate changes in thinking and behavior that make the idea of family limitation acceptable, and government family planning programs provide convenient means for doing so. Beyond the strictly enabling function of these programs, they tend to legitimize family limitation in people's minds. Rising urbanization, too, plays a catalytic role in these changes, and not only in urban areas, for it extends the reach of cities generally into their hinterlands, reducing the insularity of rural areas and bringing them closer to forces for change.

In Pakistan these influences were complemented by the labor migration opportunities in the Middle East that opened up in the early 1970s for families of modest means in rural areas and in smaller towns and cities. Visiting and returning labor migrants would bring with them news of the wider world, stories of life elsewhere, and developed-world consumer goods. Given the nature of village life, the impact of this personal connection is likely to have been far more powerful than education and mass media exposure alone.

The timing of the fertility decline remains a puzzle. Female as well as male literacy in Pakistan has been rising steadily for nearly a century (N. Mahmood, forthcoming), urbanization has risen steadily for most of the past half-century (Arif, forthcoming), and mass media has been spreading at least for several decades. Thus all of these influences operated continuously from the early 1960s through the late 1980s without any discernible effect on the level of fertility at the national level. How then can they explain the decline that finally began in the late 1980s?

One answer, good as far as it goes, lies in distinguishing underlying from instigating causes (Little 1989). A random gust of wind may trigger an avalanche, but the underlying cause is prior accumulation of precarious snow. Similarly, fertility decline may fail to materialize for an extended period during which

change in the underlying causes accumulates, and it is some instigating event that finally initiates the decline. Certainly Figure 1 suggests an avalanche rather than the simple, linear change that would be described by a multivariate statistical model. But whereas the precipitating cause of an avalanche is generally irrelevant, it would be satisfying and perhaps useful and important to know why fertility decline in Pakistan began, so very specifically, in the late 1980s.

Without attempting a specific explanation for why fertility began to decline when it did, we note that, paradoxically, the opportunity for labor migration to the Middle East may explain both the prolonged high fertility and the rapidity of its eventual decline. During the 1960s and 1970s, the opportunities may have discouraged what would otherwise have been the normal reaction to rising numbers of surviving children, by providing for their support and holding out the promise of similar opportunities in the future. At the same time, however, the opportunities were inculcating knowledge and attitudes that would trigger and sustain rapid fertility decline when families perceived the need to reduce the number of children.

**(Excerpt)**

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