



FEMALE EDUCATION AND ITS IMPACT ON FERTILITY

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ABSTRACT

The degree of personal autonomy of women in India varies from state to state. Several studies have noted the regional variations in the status of women in India. The negative correlation between women's education and fertility is strongly observed across regions and time; however, its interpretation is unclear. Women's education level could affect fertility through its impact on women's health and their physical capacity to give birth, children's health, the number of children desired, and women's ability to control birth and knowledge of different birth control methods. Each of these mechanisms depends on the individual, institutional, and country circumstances experienced. Their relative importance may change along a country's economic development process.

INRODUCTION

In principle, women who attend school may have different ideas on family size than those who do not attend school. Hence, economists have questioned whether the observed correlation between women's education and fertility is causal. The countries with a higher share of better-educated women tend to have lower fertility rates. However, even at similar levels of schooling, fertility rates differ across countries, suggesting that other factors might also influence fertility

Supply of children

The supply of children is the number of children a woman is physically capable of bearing. This can be measured by the maximum number of surviving children a couple would have if they did not intentionally attempt to control family size¹. When better-educated women have more maternal knowledge than less-educated women, e.g. with regard to prenatal care and child nutrition, they can be expected to have higher fertility and infants with better survival prospects. The possibility that education may limit women's exposure to pregnancy could be more relevant to teenage girls. In school, girls have fewer opportunities to become pregnant than if they are not in school². In this context, an extension of mandatory education may generate an "incarceration effect" for teenage girls. The study on Norway's education reform found that one additional year of schooling reduced the chance of teenage pregnancy by eight percentage points³. Hence,

number of years of education can impact the timing of childbearing. Since entering motherhood at a young age may hamper one's career development, the reduction of teenage pregnancy, alone, is an important policy objective.⁴

Demand for children

The demand for children can be described as the number of children a couple would like to have if they are free to choose. It is predicted that better-educated women desire fewer children than less-educated women.⁵ The job of raising children at home is usually more time-intensive than working in the labour market. As better-educated women earn higher incomes, they may feel that raising children is the more expensive option because of the income forgone⁶. In this case, wages are not only a measure of the value of the mother's time, they also contribute to family income. If educated women tend to marry educated men, then the income effect would suggest that these women would be expected to have more children because they can afford to⁷. As women's incomes increase, they tend to have fewer children. And since the number of years of schooling is an important determinant of earnings, it follows that female education indirectly reduces fertility through their earnings.⁸

A study on the impact of women's education in India points out that, during that country's "green revolution," a time of rapid growth in agricultural production during the 1960s and 1970s, literate women commanded a premium dowry in the marriage market even when the return to female education in the labour market was not observed⁹. Educated men sought to marry educated women because of the higher quality care such wives would provide to any future children. Findings show that children with literate mothers studied for more hours than those whose mothers were illiterate.

The demand for schooled wives, during that period, was mainly due to the potential returns to these women raising better-educated children at home rather than returns to their employment in the labour market. Other arguments for the impact of women's education on fertility are the role these women's incomes play in improving their families' economic prospects, and the improved social status that comes with higher education. Both mechanisms reduce the need for more children. For a household in a traditional agricultural economy, children are an important source of labour. They are also a source of support during parents' old age. However, as households of women with more education tend to earn higher incomes, they would have less need to rely on children financially¹⁰.

Also, in patriarchal societies, sons are valued more than daughters because they bring their parents a higher social status and are often responsible for taking care of them. However, women with higher education tend to exhibit a weaker preference for sons than less-educated women, due to their financial independence and awareness of gender equality. Cost of birth control As long as there is a gap between the maximum number of achievable births and the desired number of children, a couple has an incentive to control birth. Better-educated women are more likely to be aware of modern contraceptives and to adopt new birth-control methods; their education may also help to improve their bargaining power with their

husbands, thereby earning them consent to use contraception in the context of developing countries¹¹. Evidence shows that the differences in fertility between women's education groups, across developed and developing countries, are indeed strongly correlated with differences in contraceptive use. Another argument is that women's higher education empowers them to make decisions on their fertility. In fact, women's empowerment could be the driving force for the effect of education on fertility¹².

CONCLUSION

In both developed and developing countries, better-educated women have fewer children than less-educated women. However, the reasons for this are less clear, since the benefits of education extend beyond the value of women's time. Education can reduce fertility because better-educated women earn more and may raise their children more effectively. Education also improves maternal and child health, thereby increasing a woman's physical capacity to give birth and reducing the (economic) necessity for more children. However, the fact that educated women tend to breastfeed for shorter periods lengthens their exposure to (a new) pregnancy. Higher education empowers women and includes them in household decision-making on family planning. The return to women's education as caregivers at home suggests family-friendly policies may allow for a parent to remain at home with their children and invest time in nurturing the next generation. Hence, in the interests of both efficiency and equity, policies should be balanced by strengthening education for the disadvantaged/ less-educated, which could improve their children's long-term prospects in terms of education, employment, and earnings. The returns to education in contraceptive use in both developed and developing countries implies that policies that promote female education complement family planning. However, policymakers should always measure a particular program's cost-effectiveness against the alternatives.

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