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Are generalised and personal ideal family size preferences comparable?: The Sri Lankan experience

Dr. W. Indralal De Silva

Introduction

How many children do couples want? The answer is a reflection of the value attached to children within a given cultural setting as well as individual considerations. As fertility control becomes possible for more people in the world, the question of how many children are desired becomes increasingly important in population growth^{1,2} studies. Research findings in the developed world have shown that family size preferences, as expressed in survey responses, closely approximate eventual fertility or completed family size³⁻⁹. However, there is no consensus that the same is true in most developing countries. Some have argued that the concept of family size preference, especially ideal family size, is meaningless in developing countries, lacking in validity and reliability¹⁰⁻¹². According to this line of thinking, for many respondents in these countries, choosing to have a particular number of children is a meaningless idea which they have never considered before the interview, and which

they do not treat as a target for action. Davis¹³ believes that consequently, the responses would mainly reflect the desire to say what the respondents thought interviewers or authorities wished to hear. Contradicting this opinion, though, others have argued that with adequate probing and accurate rephrasing of questions, even illiterate respondents can be guided into giving meaningful answers¹⁴⁻¹⁷. Indeed empirical evidence on the quality of family size preference data from many WFS and other surveys shows that those data are far from meaningless¹⁸⁻²³.

The main objective of this study is to use cross-sectional and longitudinal data to estimate reproductive preference levels and differentials of Sri Lankan women, and more importantly to examine how different are responses to generalised ideal family size measure in 1982 compared to responses to personal ideal family size measure in 1985. In the absence of a commonly agreed upon summary indicator of preferred fertility²⁴, the present study will shed light

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