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Fertility trends in Syria: Application of the own-children method

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The analysis of the fertility transition in Syria allows us to distinguish several phases. The first phase was when fertility reached world records, and resisted any change. Followed by the phase of rapid decline in the mid-1980s, and lastly by a phase of slow decrease or a phase of quasi-stagnation in fertility. Despite the interest to represent more accurate estimates of recent Syrian fertility levels and trends, very few studies have been devoted to this question. This paper addresses this issue by trying to review and analyze trends in fertility over the last three decades.

The objective of this paper is to provide a continuous series of fertility rates estimated by the same method for the entire period studied to better follow fertility trends in Syria.

The data used in this work are essentially those of demographic surveys available in Syria- PAPCHILD 1993, PAPFAM 2001 and the multiple indicator cluster survey MICS3 conducted in 2006. Each of these three surveys is a national survey based on a representative sample of households throughout the country. The 1993 sample includes completed questionnaires for 5998 households and within these households, 4545 ever-married women between the ages of 15-49 and the 2001 survey includes questionnaires for 9500 households and 6953 ever-married women aged 15-49 within these households. The multiple indicator cluster survey MICS3 of 2006 includes questionnaires to 19,019 households and 25,026 ever-married women aged 15-49.

Fertility rates are estimated by the own-children method of fertility estimation. This method provides estimates for total fertility rates and for age specific fertility rates as well. The own-children estimates based on the three surveys data allow us to analyze single- year movements of fertility from 1979 until 2006 not only for all Syria but also by urban and rural areas. Unfortunately, the available data doesn't allow estimating fertility by the own-children method at the provincial level for the whole period of 1979-2006. The fertility by province is estimated and analyzed for the period of 1992-2006.

This study confirms the results of other studies using different methods that fertility in Syria was very high during the 1970s, and it continued to increase until the early 1980s. In the first half of the 1980s, the fertility declined slowly, and then it started to decline rapidly in the mid-1980s. However, this period of rapid decline in fertility seemed to end. Despite the continued decline in fertility during the 1990s, the rate of its decline has slowed down. In 2006, the total fertility rate was about 3 children per woman.

It shows that the fertility transition was universal with the same age pattern of fertility for the whole country and in urban and rural areas. Moreover, at the onset of the transition, fertility decline has been recorded for all age groups; it was not limited to the young and the old age groups of women. The fertility transition in urban and rural areas was simultaneous; the analysis doesn't show a clear difference in the onset of the transition between urban and rural areas. In addition, over time, the big difference in fertility between urban and rural areas has narrowed remarkably.

The explanation of the Syrian fertility transition should not be limited to a single factor or one aspect. In fact, there are several factors or conditions that led to such a transition of fertility. In the second half of the 1980s the economic crisis, accompanied by political problems, triggered the decline of fertility after a long period of maintaining its high levels. Faced with economic difficulties new behaviors emerge. The age at marriage rose, contraceptive use increased and women's participation in the labor market became more visible. Moreover, the rising cost of children and especially the cost of education played a very important role in changing the priorities of Syrian families from the quantity of children to their quality.

Recent studies suggest that the Syrian fertility is in a phase of quasi-stagnation or temporary blockage above 3 children per woman (Youssef 2009, Courbage 2007). Although the method of own children can't give us a confirmation of this phenomenon as it underestimates the fertility for the two or the three years before the survey, this analysis confirms the stall, supported by the results published of the latest survey conducted by the Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics in 2009, which indicate that total fertility rate was 3.5 children per woman. A fit to the Syrian fertility trends from 1979 to 2006 was obtained with a reciprocal logarithmic model. It predicts that fertility decline to 2.15 in 2040. In fact, all arguments seem to favor the continued stall of fertility in Syria at least in this decade. Regional differences may continue to narrow slowly to a certain level that can't be exceeded. The regions inhabited by the religious minorities: the Alawis, the Druzes, and the Ismailis have low fertility, and the Sunni regions (Arabs and Kurds) have high fertility. Syrian society

is a strongly patrilineal and a male-dominated society, where properties and rights are inherited from father to son and the place of women is reduced even those very qualified among them. Families are keen on having at least one male child to perpetuate the "family name" and bequeath their properties and those of their parents to sons and not to girls. This preference is more pronounced among Sunnis than among the followers of other Islamic sects because the system of inheritance of the first admits that the female offspring alone doesn't constitute the *asaba* (patrilineal relatives) which excludes uncles and male cousins from succession. Thus, in order for fertility rate to decline below 3 children per woman, about 23.8 % of families must accept the risk of having only female offspring. This problem is insurmountable at least in the visible future, especially in the absence of a birth control policy imposed by the government and legitimized by the religious appreciated by the people. Consequently, the Syrian fertility will continue to fluctuate around this level without exceeding it.