

6-2005

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### Recommended Citation

Sahleyesus, Daniel (2005) "Attitudes toward Family Size Preferences among Urban Ethiopians," *PSC Discussion Papers Series*: Vol. 19 : Iss. 10, Article 1.

Available at: <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/pscpapers/vol19/iss10/1>

ISSN 1183-7284

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Discussion Paper no. 05-10

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June 2005

On the web in PDF format: <http://www.ssc.uwo.ca/sociology/popstudies/dp/dp05-10.pdf>

Revised version of paper presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Population Society, University of Western Ontario, London, ON, June 2005

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Discussion Paper  
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## **Attitudes toward Family Size Preferences among Urban Ethiopians**

### **ABSTRACT**

*Making use of data obtained from a recent fieldwork conducted in five major urban centers of Ethiopia, this study examines attitudes of respondents on family size preferences to understand the fertility transition in urban areas. The methodology includes in-depth qualitative interviews and focus group discussions. Urban residents may not have a significantly different motivation as to why they would like to have children compared to people from rural areas. However, urban residents have a reproductive goal that take into account averting risks in the face of economic difficulties and tailoring preferences to achieve upward social mobility. Respondents give a reported family size which they see as the best they can support given their economic situation and beyond that number they were less certain to provide the kind of necessities they would like to give to their children. There is emphasis on the wellbeing of relatively smaller number of children and attaining a certain level of investment in ones own human capital which are incompatible with large family size preferences.*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The classic Demographic Transition Theory assumes that industrialization and urbanization brought about structural changes in the way social life is organized, which in turn stimulates fertility decline. Fertility would change in response to the gradual change in the cultural, social and institutional arrangements that had promoted higher reproductive behavior (Notestein, 1945). In his “social capillarity” explanation, Dumont argued that the aspirations of individuals to move up in the socioeconomic ladder would motivate people to control their fertility (Spengler, 1979). The emphasis is to help one’s children to excel in life. In environments where social mobility is seen to be possible but not assured the “social capillarity” principle would be intensified and individuals would limit the size of their family. McDonald (2000) observes that in high fertility societies women may choose to have fewer births in order to shape their own and their children’s future for the better. However, at the early stage of the transition, smaller family size may not advantage the economic wellbeing of the family.

In Davis's (1963) view, when mortality declines, households that face economic strain would resort to multi-phasic responses, one of which is regulating their family size. Similarly, Cleland argues that the pathway through which mortality affects fertility is principally economic, expressed in terms of the pressure on households with large number of surviving children. However, he singled out the "mediating role of the innovation that provides the main behavioral mechanism for fertility reduction, namely the routine deployment of contraception within marriage" (Cleland, 2001, 85).

LeGrand et al. (2003) observed that reproductive goals and risks include factors other than numbers of children and child mortality. Parents would like to have successful and healthy children which imply the need for more resources. In the absence of sufficient investments parents may assume significant risks of undesirable child outcomes. "Investments in individual children-- health care, schooling, 'moral' upbringing, and so forth-- are one way for parents to reduce these risks" (LeGrand et al., 2003, 396). Realizing such investments, which require time, finance, and emotions, would be more feasible for those who maintain smaller family sizes.

Dalla Zuanna (2004) argues that an elevated quality of life that parents would like to provide to their child or children might be the reason why Italians are having lower fertility. The risk of not ensuring the social mobility of their existing children and not being able to guarantee enough resources for any additional child or children, provides the incentive for most Italians to opt for smaller families (Dalla Zuanna, 2004). When parents see little or no opportunity of social mobility for their children, they do their best to produce "high quality children" who can stand better chance for success. The

motivation to produce high quality children “easily exceeds the wish for a more numerous family, although it is still present, like a voice from the past” (ibid, 64).

Investing in ones own human capital, which conflicts with social reproduction, is also seen as one way of avoiding risks in the globalizing labor market. McDonald (2002) argues that very low fertility is more the product of a constraint than of preference. For instance, there are many people who would undergo expensive and emotionally challenging infertility treatments and those who would go through the process of adoption, in order to have children. In developing countries, for many people, remaining childless is the most unwanted outcome and people would try anything under their power to have a child or children. That is, most people desire to have children. However, as McDonald (2002) argues, risks and uncertainties intervene, bringing hesitations in reproductive decisions. Another European study concluded that due to uncertainties in the labor market and the increasing importance of education Spanish young people have been increasingly constrained in making the transition to parenthood (Simo Noguera et al., 2002).

Although most of these examples are based on developed nations, they provide a useful framework for thinking of childbearing in specific developing country contexts, particularly urban areas. The theoretical approach suggests that people’s fertility desires are the reflections of the cultural and social features of society, while the economic structure provides the constraints within which they operate. In societies or groups where large family values dominate, it is highly likely that people would have higher desired as well as achieved fertility (Shah & Nathanson, 2004). Socioeconomic changes would be responsible in bringing changes especially in the costs of rearing children.

The objective in this paper is to examine the attitudes and the values that underlie the family size preferences of urban residents in Ethiopia. Individuals may find that life in urban centers is incompatible with the traditional large family size. Most importantly, we expect that limiting family size is taken by urban residents as a mode of risk aversion. However, having children is still a source of social prestige, security later in life and emotional satisfaction and happiness. It is proposed that urban residents are balancing the adherence to social and cultural norms, while seeking to avoid the risks of large family size.

## 2. BACKGROUND

Ethiopia is the second most populous country, after Nigeria, in sub-Saharan Africa. The majority of Ethiopians live in rural areas, estimated as 85 percent of the total population (Population Reference Bureau, 2004). The Total Fertility Rate did not show any marked decline between the mid 1950s and early to mid 1980s, a time when it exhibits even a slight increase (UN, 2002). Since the late 1980s this fertility rate began to decline from 7.7 in 1984 to 6.4 in 1990 (CSA, 1993) and further to 5.9 in 2000 (CSA & ORC Macro, 2001). However this national trend masks a very important variation in fertility behavior across regions and sub-regions within the country. Although the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) for the country as a whole stood at 5.9 children per woman in 2000, the TFR in urban areas is almost half the national total, at about 3.3, while that of the rural areas is at 6.4 (CSA & ORC Macro, 2001). An even more surprising finding from the 2000 Demographic and Health Survey, and the 1994 census, is that some urban centers are experiencing rates of fertility which are below replacement level. For

example, the country's capital, Addis Ababa, and Harar, an urban center located in eastern Ethiopia, have estimated TFRs of 1.81 and 1.82 respectively. The fertility rate in some other major urban centers of the country is also relatively low: the city state of Dire Dawa and major urban areas in the northern, central and eastern parts of the country have fertility rates that are below 2.5 children per woman (CSA, 1998; CSA and ORC Macro, 2001).

In the past, several studies in Ethiopia attempted to explore the course and causes of fertility change (for example Hassen, 1989, Hailemariam 1991, 1992; Kinfu 2000, 2001). Kinfu (2004:224) argues that “cultural values regarding family formation and kinship structure that favor nuclear-family arrangements, adverse economic circumstances that strongly influenced the housing sector and employment, and institutional changes relating to the revolutionary experiences of the country” are fundamental in bringing the dramatic decline of fertility in Addis Ababa to below replacement level. Based on a Community and Family Survey from the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People's Region of Ethiopia, a study by Hogan and Berhanu (2003:60) concluded that fertility differentials in this region are attributed to cultural factors particularly to “social norms and preferences about appropriate age at marriage, family size or contraceptive use”. In the same region, an earlier study found out that women's interest in birth spacing and contraceptive use is linked to household poverty, although poor women are less likely to act on these interests (Hogan et al., 1999). Especially at the beginning of the demographic transition, countries generally experience significant differences between urban and rural areas. However, the difference of three children per woman between the urban and rural areas as observed recently in Ethiopia is unusual, and



it applies to only four other countries of sub-Saharan Africa: Burkina Faso, Tanzania, Togo and Uganda as indicated in their most recent Demographic and Health Surveys (ORC Macro, 2005).

Some researchers focused their attention on the dramatic fertility decline recoded in Addis Ababa (Kinfu 2001; Lindstrom and Woubalem, 2003; Sibanda et al. 2003), but this study expands the scope to more urban centers of the country, while employing qualitative methods. In particular, this study seeks to investigate questions on the preferred family size of urban residents, their attitude toward small and large family sizes were considered to determine how urban residents have been able to achieve a significantly lower fertility compared to rural residents.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Most studies of fertility change in Ethiopia have focused on quantitative analyses of data from large scale sample surveys and the two censuses that the country had conducted in the past. However, these studies provide fewer interpretations on the decision frameworks that can be obtained through focus group discussions and in depth one to one interviews. For instance, Maggioni (2004:91) argues that, “through narrative interviews on reproductive choices and child birth, on marriage and divorce,” qualitative studies can produce “results that are not descriptions of the variance of the phenomenon, typical of surveys, but are instead narrative descriptions.”

Qualitative data from volunteer respondents drawn from five major urban centers (Addis Ababa, Nazareth, Bahir Dar, Jimma and Harar) were collected between May and August 2004. These urban centers are home to a third of the country’s urban population.

Both in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were employed to collect information pertinent to the research question. The five urban centers, and respondents from each of these, were selected based on the criteria developed prior to the commencement of the field work. Geographical location, population size and a relatively lower total fertility rate, as indicated in the 2000 Ethiopian Demographic and Health Survey (ETDHS), were considered in order to select urban centers. Background characteristics such as marital status, religion, ethnicity, education and employment status were taken into account while selecting respondents for the study. The sample is not intended to represent the population from which it is drawn. Instead, an attempt was made to ensure the inclusion of urban residents with different characteristics. We conducted a total of 60 interviews of individuals (on average 12 persons per urban centre) and 6 focus group discussions, two in Addis Ababa and one each in other of the urban centers. For the present paper I mostly use data from the in-depth interviews.

Questions were open-ended and organized into different sections. The first part was intended to solicit background information of respondents. The second section asked why people have children, why the respondent would want to have children, attitudes toward not having children at all, attitudes toward large families, who has large and who has small number of children. Also included in this section were questions regarding respondents' expected family size and its justification, ideal family size and its justification and sex composition. Respondents were also asked whether they observe any difference in the number of children between their own parents' generation and their generation. The third part inquired about marriage: preferred age at marriage for men and women, preferred age at marriage for daughters and sons, attitudes toward women

working outside, and attitudes toward divorce. The fourth part comprised questions on family planning and abortion. Finally, respondents were asked to share their view as to why there is a big gap between urban and rural residents in the number of children.

In three urban centers (Addis Ababa, Nazareth and Jimma), male and female interviewers interviewed their respective gender counterparts. In the two other urban centers, female interviewers interviewed both male and female respondents. Two focus group discussions were facilitated by the author and four by the research assistants who are university graduates. The research assistants attempted to encourage respondents to provide further explanations to their responses. This strategy worked well for most but not all interview sessions. Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted using the local language Amharic which is widely spoken in all urban areas. These were translated into English and transcribed. Transcriptions were entered onto NVivo software that enables organizing data along thematic lines.

#### 4. CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS

Table 1 presents the percentage distribution of respondents by selected characteristics and according to sex. Of the total 60 respondents 31 were men and 29 were women. Close to half of respondents were orthodox Christians, a third were Muslims and 15 percent Protestants. The majority, 60 percent, of respondents had high school complete or above education. Among women, about 45 percent were not employed, 24 percent self-employed and 31 percent employed in a public and or private organization. Some 90 percent of men were employed, about half in each of self-employed and public or private organizations. The average age of women respondents was 28.2 years while for men it

was 31.4 years. Close to half percent of respondents were from the Amhara ethnic group, 22 percent Oromo and 17 percent Guraghe and the remaining 14 percent came from other ethnic groups.

Table 1- Percentage distribution of respondents by selected characteristics, according to sex

	<b>Female</b> (N= 29)	<b>Male</b> (N= 31)	<b>Total</b> (N= 60)
<b>Urban Center</b>			
. Addis Ababa	20.7	22.6	21.7
. Nazareth	17.2	19.4	18.3
. Bahir Dar	20.7	19.4	20.0
. Harar	20.7	19.4	20.0
. Jimma	20.7	19.4	20.0
<b>Religion</b>			
. Orthodox Christian	51.7	45.2	48.3
. Muslim	31.0	41.9	36.7
. Protestant	17.2	12.9	15.0
<b>Education</b>			
. None/some primary	17.2	16.1	16.7
. Primary complete/ some high school	24.1	22.6	23.3
. High school complete and above	58.6	61.3	60.0
<b>Age group</b>			
. 15-24	27.6	9.7	18.3
. 25-34	55.2	54.8	55.0
. 35 +	17.2	35.5	26.7
<b>Ethnic Group</b>			
. Guraghe	17.2	16.1	16.7
. Amhara	41.4	51.6	46.7
. Oromo	24.1	19.4	21.7
. Harari	3.4	6.5	5.0
. Other	13.8	6.5	10.0
<b>Employment status</b>			
. Employed (public/private org)	31.0	45.2	38.3
. Self employed	24.1	45.2	35.0
. Not employed	44.8	9.7	26.7
<b>Marital status</b>			
. Single	41.4	41.9	41.7
. Evermarried	58.6	58.1	58.3

## 5. ATTITUDES TOWARD REPRODUCTION

Following a previous research (Beaujot, 1988), respondents were asked to provide explanations regarding why people have children. The reason given by most was “to see oneself through children”. Nearly half of the respondents used a local metaphor, which literally translated into English means: “to see ones eyes through ones own eyes”. Both male and female respondents underlined the importance of “creating or having ones own likeness”, “having an image of their own”, “having name sake”.

People want to have children because they want to have their own replica (43 years of age, married man, Jimma).

To see one self through children (37 years of age, married man, Nazareth).

As the saying goes, to reproduce oneself and “see ones own eye” through children (28 years of age, single woman, Addis Ababa).

People want to have children to see their own images and to leave their name and history to the next generation (23 years of age, married woman, Bahir Dar).

The next two major reasons mentioned for having children were linked to the ideas of children “as sources of happiness” and “as a source of support during old age”. Children as a source of happiness, and to strengthen the love between the couple were found to be more important to women than men (see Table 2).

Table 2- Percentage distribution of respondents, by attitudes toward children, current, expected and ideal family size, according to sex

<b>Attitude</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Reasons for having children*</b>	<b>(N=29)</b>	<b>(N=31)</b>	<b>(N=60)</b>
. to see oneself through children	48.3	45.2	46.7
. children provides joy	65.5	12.9	38.3
. support in old age	34.5	29.0	31.7
. follow the will of God	17.2	16.1	16.7
. to continue the family tree	10.3	19.4	15.0
. to have inheritor/heir	6.9	22.6	15.0
. to have children is natural	13.8	12.9	13.3
. strengthen love between couple	20.7	6.5	13.3
<b>Family size one considers large</b>	<b>(N=28)</b>	<b>(N=31)</b>	<b>(N=59)</b>
. 2-3	7.1	6.5	6.8
. 4-5	32.1	48.4	40.7
. 6+	60.7	45.2	52.5
<b>Attitude toward large families</b>	<b>(N=29)</b>	<b>(N=24)</b>	<b>(N=54)</b>
. Approval	3.4	12.5	7.5
. Conditional approval	17.2	20.8	20.8
. Disapproval	79.3	66.7	73.6
<b>Who has large number of children?*</b>	<b>(N=29)</b>	<b>(N=31)</b>	<b>(N=60)</b>
. low income & other disadvantaged groups	51.7	48.4	50.0
. those with no formal education	65.5	12.9	38.3
. highly religious people/those whose wombs are blessed	34.5	29.0	31.7
. Family planning non users	44.8	19.4	31.7
. those who doesn't understand what it takes to have and raise children	17.2	19.4	18.3
. rural residents	27.6	12.9	20.0
. those with traditional values & ideas	13.8	6.5	10.0
. rich people	10.3	9.7	10.0
. those in polygamous marriage/with multiple sexual partners/ women with no household decision making power	10.3	3.2	6.7
<b>Small family size</b>	<b>(N=25)</b>	<b>(N=26)</b>	<b>(N=51)</b>
. 1	12.0	23.1	17.6
. 2	48.0	30.8	39.2
. 3	8.0	30.8	19.6
. 4+	32.0	15.4	23.5

Table 2 (Cont'd)	Female	Male	Total
<b>Who has small number of children?*</b>	<b>(N=29)</b>	<b>(N=31)</b>	<b>(N=60)</b>
. family planning method users	27.6	22.6	25.0
. educated people	69.0	48.4	58.3
. those who balance b/n their resources & the number of children they want to have	20.7	3.2	11.7
<b>Attitude toward not having children at all</b>	<b>(N=27)</b>	<b>(N=22)</b>	<b>(N=49)</b>
. Beneficial to couples/individuals	3.7	0.0	2.0
. Not-beneficial to couples/individuals	85.2	95.5	89.8
. Has neither advantage or disadvantage	11.1	2.1	8.2
<b>Circumstances people may/should not have children*</b>	<b>(N=29)</b>	<b>(N=31)</b>	<b>(N=60)</b>
. When couples are financially/ economically constrained	55.2	41.9	48.3
. Can't think of remaining childless	17.2	25.8	21.7
. When there are health concerns to either spouse	13.8	22.6	18.3
. If the relationship is not working	24.1	6.5	15.0
. It might be the work of God	3.4	6.5	5.0
. Personal choice	6.9	0.0	3.3
<b>Ideal number of children</b>	<b>(N=29)</b>	<b>(N=27)</b>	<b>(N=51)</b>
. 1	3.4	3.7	2.0
. 2	29.2	55.6	43.1
. 3	8.3	11.1	9.8
. 4	62.5	22.2	41.2
. 6+	0.0	7.4	3.9
<b>Why ideal?*</b>	<b>(N=29)</b>	<b>(N=31)</b>	<b>(N=60)</b>
. because this number fits my budget and allow me to provide good care to my kids	41.4	38.7	40.0
. for balanced sex composition	20.7	16.1	18.3
. some may die	3.4	3.2	3.3
. for the sake of mother's health	3.4	3.2	3.3
<b>Current number of children</b>	<b>(N=29)</b>	<b>(N=31)</b>	<b>(N=60)</b>
. 0	44.8	51.6	48.3
. 1-2	20.7	32.3	26.7
. 3-4	24.1	9.7	16.7
. 5 +	10.3	6.5	8.3
<b>Expected number of children</b>	<b>(N=29)</b>	<b>(N=31)</b>	<b>(N=60)</b>
. 0-1	3.4	6.5	5.0
. 2	27.6	51.6	40.0
. 3-4	58.6	25.8	41.7
. 5+	6.9	9.7	8.3
Up to God	3.4	6.5	5.0

\* Questions which allowed for multiple responses.

Respondents agreed that children can make one happy and “they let a parent forget all his/her troubles”. Most respondents emphasized that children makes a house full of life and it is quite pleasurable to see them around. A mother of seven and a grand mother to several children said during the fieldwork that “a child is a precious jewelry”. By the virtue of having a child one is wearing that beautiful and valuable ornament. Then she asked “who doesn’t want to have that?” Some others also replied in the same way but argued that it is mandatory to have children.

“It is a must to have a child in ones life time” (25 years of age, single woman, Nazareth).

“We cannot afford to be without children” (35 years of age, married woman, Bahir dar).

“It is necessary to have children as a human being” (30 years of age, married man, Harar).

“People should replace themselves before they die” (27 years of age married woman, Harar).

These reasons were largely given by those respondents who anticipated happiness and old age support from having children. The overall attitude among most Ethiopians is that children are the most important and dependable sources of old age security as the following interviewee argues.

The reason to have children is because they will support me in many ways, they will feed me, they will defend for me and if I can I will educate them (35 years of age, married woman, Bahir Dar).

The implication from the above interviewee, which represents the attitudes of many others, is that one needs to have children regardless of her/his ability to support them. This view sees children as a source of wealth. Individuals heavily rely on children as their security later in their life. As the following quotes depict, most respondents gave multiple reasons for people having children.



To see ones own offspring, to have a descendant, a successor. During old ages children will take care of parents. For myself, I will have someone who will take care of my funeral, to be my name sake (38 years of age, married man, Jimma).

I know children are necessary. Even when I get older I know relatives would not be around so children are essential. It is also your child who inherits your property (19 years of age, single woman, Nazareth).

In general, reproduction is the law of nature. Everyone wants to have a child. In a married life children are necessary. They cement the love between their parents. Children strengthen love. Married life without children is void (49 years of age married woman, Jimma).

Different people have different ideas about childbirth; some see giving birth as self-replacement, some have children for inheritance and others could have children as a source of wealth (38 years of age, married man, Addis Ababa).

When explaining his own experience, the above respondent suggested that his own decision to have children is partly explained by mere accident and partly to submit to the will of his parents which he took as an obligatory thing to do.

I had no reasons and it was not intentional while I gave birth. My family forced me. And I was also considered having children as an obligation. I gave birth to three children one after the other having narrow birth interval and the last one came after a while.

When the question comes to “why a respondent wants to have children her/himself?”, most wanted to make sure that they have someone at the later stage of their life in order to take care of them. This care is expected to run up until their final hours alive and beyond. The question “who is going to take care of my funeral?” once I have gone was a question raised by many when they build their case for having children. Other reasons for having children include, “following the will of God” (a reason which is equally important to both men and women), “to continue the family tree” and “to have inheritor/heir” (reasons which are predominant among male respondents), “having children is natural”, and “children strengthen love between couples”. The importance of

children in uniting husband and wife in love within marriage is more often cited by women. Children are portrayed as critical to a woman in order to secure greater love from her husband and to win his family's favor. Compared to women, most men respondents saw passing their name and property to the next generation as more important.

Respondents were also asked about their attitude toward large families, which number they consider large and who they perceive as having large families. Families with six or more children were considered by many respondents as large (slightly over 60 percent of women compared to 45 percent of men considered six and above children per family as large). A few respondents mentioned between two and three children as large. When asked "who has large family?" half of the respondents replied that "low income and other disadvantaged groups have large families". Both men and women almost equally agree on this characterization of large families. Over one third of respondents mentioned that "illiterate or people who lack formal education" as having large families. This is particularly the case for most women respondents. Highly "religious families and those whose wombs are blessed" are also among those that have large families according to some respondents. An equal proportion of respondents also mentioned "family planning non-users" as people with large families. Other responses include "those who doesn't understand what it takes to have and raise children, rural residents, people with traditional values and attitudes such as those who think and act on the principle of 'a child can grow in its own destiny'". Very few respondents mentioned that rich people, those in polygamous marriage or with multiple sexual partners as having large families. As mentioned earlier, a significant number of interviewees saw families with large

number of children as those who lack education. As the result, these people are seen as lacking important information on family planning use:

People in rural areas are uneducated and don't use birth control methods because they don't understand the harm of having more children and they don't have the decision making power to use the methods. As the result they will have more number of children (25 years of age, married woman, Harar).

Some respondents judged those with large families in the negative by portraying them as those manifesting "careless or irresponsible" behavior. According to these respondents people should weigh between the resources they have and the number of children they can support with these resources. According to some interviewees some families do not have much idea of what it requires to rear children. As one interviewee mentioned "some are even more irresponsible, for example people on the streets and the visually impaired" go for having children anticipating help from them and to use them as guides.

Rural residents were also mentioned as having large families, expecting economic return from children and in order to achieve social status through numbers. A common reason given for rural residents to have quite a large number of children is that life is relatively inexpensive compared to urban areas. Focus group participants from Jimma questioned that in good times and especially in the past "what rural residents would buy except salt?" They have agreed that this situation explains the behavior of rural residents as relatively less risky.

About two thirds of in-depth interview respondents disapprove of large families, nearly one out of five respondents gave their conditional approval while a small minority gave outright approval. When respondents disapprove of large families they largely

support their argument in terms of economic feasibility and to a lesser extent in terms of women's health. Most respondents argued that the current earnings of people are not sufficient to even modestly support more than a limited number of children. Unlike in the past, nowadays children need to be schooled, well-fed and have transportation and health related expenses. Thus, bringing up children is seen as an economic burden compared to older times and in the ever expanding urban way of life:

People who have many children are illiterate people and those who did not take into account their income. As the result they end up having children beyond their capacity to support them. Children need to be educated, fed, clothed... etc. If children are deprived of all these maybe parents are having them in excess of their real capacity to take better care of them (25 years of age, married woman, Jimma).

Respondents were also asked to express the number that they think is small and to mention who has those families. However, they were not directly asked to express their opinion regarding small families. Families with two children are defined by one third of respondents as small families while one out of five respondents considered families with 4 or more number of children as small. Nearly half of women respondents considered families with two children as small, while about a third of men consider this number small. Women were more likely than men to consider those families with 4 children as small. The majority of respondents explained that educated people often have small family size (much more women attribute small family size to being educated). As expected, family planning users are also portrayed as those with small families. "Those who are able to balance between their resources and the number of children they want to have" would also have small number of children according to some respondents. Clearly,

respondents gave more positive responses regarding small families than for large families, but a quarter see sizes of four or more as small.

#### 6. IDEAL, EXPECTED AND CURRENT NUMBER OF CHILDREN

After discussing large and small families, respondents were asked what they consider to be the ideal number of children per family. The average ideal number of children was found to be 3.1 children for the in-depth interview participants, with average figures of 2.8 for men and 3.3 for women. These numbers are lower than in the 2000 DHS where the average ideal family sizes were 4.3 for men and 4.1 for women from urban areas (CSA & Macro, 2001:93). Ideals of size two and four were the most common, with over half of men saying two and about 60 percent of women saying four children was ideal.

When asked why they consider the number they just mentioned was ideal most respondents provided cost related reasons. They stated that the number of children they mentioned as ideal was the number that fits their budget so as to provide better care to them. The second most important reason given by respondents as to why they consider a certain number of children is ideal to them is for the purpose of achieving a desired (usually an equal number of girls and boys) sex composition of children. It is due to this that from among those who mentioned 2 or 4 children as an ideal most attribute importance to the sex composition of their children. In the event where some respondents hesitate between two numbers, most mentioned they may go to the higher number if only their income has significantly increased to support an additional family member.

It is only one respondent who favored one child as an ideal number and no respondent expressed his/her desire for not wanting to have any children. Participants of this study were specifically asked about their opinion regarding not having any children at all. The question was worded as “what do you think of not having any children at all? Would individuals/couples benefit or lose?” As Table 2 shows almost three-quarters of respondents disagree with the idea of not having any children at all. While four out of five women were opposing the idea of not having children at all, it was two out of three men that disagreed with this idea.

However, when respondents were further probed to think of any scenario where others may or should not have children, they gave responses that implied risk aversion. Almost one out of two respondents mentioned that in a situation where people are financially constrained and unable to take proper care of children, it is better not to have any at all. This reason is much more important to women than men. The following excerpts from interview transcriptions substantiate how people in urban areas accord major emphasis on the necessity of being financially sound in order to assume the responsibility of raising a family.

Yes, there are many factors why individuals or families may consider not having children. The first reason is poverty. They may belong to the low income group. For example, the husband may be a daily laborer and the wife might be working as a maidservant. I prefer for such kind of people not to have children. I only wish them to live together without having one (49 years of age, orthodox Christian, married woman, Jimma).

The primary reason is poverty. If they do not have enough income to raise their children it is no use to have children. It is good to have a child if you have income (22 years of age, Muslim, single woman, Jimma).

It is better if poor families don't have children but paradoxically it is the poor that are having more (19 years of age, Muslim, single man, Harar).

We see some families that are unable to give proper care for their children and we sometimes wish if they didn't had them (27 years of age, Orthodox Christian, married woman, Harar).

If the family is in severe poverty it is better not to have children because if they can't provide education to their children it is better not to have them in the first place (35 years of age, Muslim, single man, Addis Ababa).

These opinions imply that many disapprove of having children while one is under poverty or serious economic stress. This implies that risk aversion should come into an individual's or a couple's decision making process in deciding when to have children.

Approximately one out of every five respondents were of the view that in a situation where there is significant health concern on the part of either of the spouses (examples cited were people with HIV/AIDS and those in long term disability) it would be better to remain childless. The health concern scenario is more important among men than women as Table 2 shows. Other scenarios that respondents propose for others not to have children include relationships that are not working as they should (much more important to women and a quarter of them emphasized this). In very rare cases remaining childless might be due to personal choice or it could be "the works of God/Allah" (see Table 2).

Surprisingly, even after being probed, one out of five respondents replied that "they can not think of any scenario that couples/individuals may or should remain without children". In this study, compared to women, it is men who could not think of any scenario that other couples or individuals would better in remaining childless. The reactions from some of those respondents who are against this idea are seen in the following quotes:

I will never accept the life of married couples without a child (50 years of age, married man, Addis Ababa).

At least there must be one or two children in a marriage it is not a good thing to be childless (37 years of age, married man, Nazareth).

I never wish a family without a child. If someone has no child it means that he/she has not replaced himself /herself. Who is going to inherit their wealth? (45 years of age, married man, Addis Ababa).

No. there is no such instance at all. I would like everyone to have at least one or two children (34 years of age, married woman, Addis Ababa).

No I can't think of such instances. Families should have at least one child (26 years of age, married woman, Harar).

Even in situations where respondents had a reservation on some couples/individuals having children, they still are in favor of at least a certain minimum number for everyone.

Yes, it is not proper for people to give birth when they do not have enough means to feed a child. As the Amharic proverb goes it is like "*having mump over goiter*". Whatever the reason a person must have a child. There is no love without children. One must give birth. Let providence take the child's fate in its hand. One must reproduce (30 years of age, married woman, Jimma).

Opinions such as the above may seem contradictory. That is, some respondents question the economic capability of some families in order to properly rear children but support the idea of having children regardless. Here one can observe the deeply entrenched ideas of "a child can grow in its own fate" a view which is not uncommon among Ethiopians. Despite the economic factors that favor a change in the fertility behavior of couples, voluntary childlessness is not within the realm of choice.

Participants of this study had on average 1.5 children. When asked about their expected family size, respondents who gave numeric answers on average expected to have 2.8 children, with women expected to have more children than men. About 40



percent expect to have 2 children and a slightly higher percentage of respondents expect to have between 3 and 4 children. Those who expect to have 5 or more children and those who said it is “up to God” constitute about 10 percent. Asked why most prefer to have between 2 and 4 expected number of children, they repeated the reasons given to justify people’s ideal number of children. That is, for most respondents the number they expect to achieve is the best they can support given their economic situation and beyond that number they were less certain to provide the kind of necessities they would like to give to their children. Some of them explained that they “can’t afford beyond that number”, others also mentioned that attaining a certain sex composition comes into play when specifying a given ideal number of children. Mother’s health has also been mentioned by some to justify their ideal number.

I wanted to have two children because I want to give them the best. The other reason is I do not want to see the pain the mother has to go through during labor (36 years of age, married man, Jimma).

I do not think I can manage beyond that number [2 to 4]. If it is below that number they lack brother and sister (25 years of age, single man, Jimma).

With this number they will have enough things for their needs. That is food, cloths, education etc. (25 years of age, single man, Bahir Dar).

This is because, I want to send my children to good schools, and to invest what the family has on those children. To make sure I have one from both sexes, if I have one girl and one boy then I will stop at two. But if the first two happens to have the same sex, I will add one more, but not more than three (28 years of age, single woman, Addis Ababa).

For example, now I have a son. But I want him to have a sister. If I have two boys and two girls, everyone will have brother and sister (25 years of age, married woman, Jimma).

A small number of respondents (5 percent) preferred not to provide a numeric value on the size of their expected family. For these participants children are not to be

numbered and it is “up to God” to decide on the number of children that families may have. As the quote below implies it is also those “blessed ones” among children that should be considered as “real children”.

It is only some of them that are going to be blessed. If one of them happen to be better off and secures a high position, both of us (my wife and I) will have someone to take care of us when we retire. But all of them won't be blessed and dependable (38 years of age, married man, Jimma).

For these respondents, the issue is not the number but the quality of those children who will be alive and behave according to the expectations of parents to be valued as “blessed children”.

## 7. PERCEPTION OF FERTILITY DECLINE

As indicated earlier, most major urban centers of the country are experiencing a rapid fertility decline while rural fertility remains high. Although this is not unique to Ethiopia, there are only very few countries with similar level of gap between urban and rural fertility. In an attempt to gauge whether urban residents are aware of this phenomenon and their interpretation of these trends, participants were asked if they have noticed any change in the number of children from their parents to their own generations. The majority of respondents said that there is quite a difference between the previous and their own generations regarding the number of children in families. Most compared the number of children of their own parents or grand parents with their own current or expected family sizes. Accordingly, they said that the current generation has few children. They also mentioned possible factors that explain this change. Most attribute

this difference to people's desire to avoid economic hardships that comes with having large families.

There is a big difference. The number of births has decreased because nowadays life is very hard (46 years of age, married man, Jimma).

There is a big difference. My parents, for example have 13 children and they had suffered to manage the family. Now many people know about family planning and they are users of this service. The difference is due to the economic conditions of the country. Now life is very expensive compared to the previous time (40 years of age, married woman, Bahir Dar).

Yes for example my parents had five children but I don't want to have more than two children because I have seen the experiences of my parents and I don't want my children to grow the way I have grown (27 years of age, married woman, Harar).

Yes there is a difference. The difference is seen in the decreasing number of children among today's families. People have changed in such a way that they are focusing more and more on children's education... quality of life for the family. Another reason for this change, I think, is that life has become so expensive. Thus, if families limit their number of children they will take advantage (28 years of age, single woman, Addis Ababa).

As the above interviewees argue, the current generation of urban residents is having smaller families as a response to bad economic circumstances. People became aware of the changing environment in child rearing with its sizable cost implications. Under such circumstances, urban residents tend to have smaller families and try to allocate maximum resources per child rather than thinly spreading resources among a number of children.

Others relate the decreasing number of children in current urban families to education and contraceptive practice. Especially, education is mentioned by almost all respondents as the main reason leading to people's preference to have fewer children. The effect of education is explained first through raising the age at marriage and the age

at first birth among individuals. Respondents said that unlike older times, nowadays people tend to achieve a certain level of education as a step in establishing themselves before entering into marriage or starting to have children. Education is also seen as a factor that exposes couples to new ideas in terms of family building. The second reason indicated for the effect of education on reproduction in urban areas, according to interviewees, is linked to the desire by parents to send their children to the best schools which cost more. In this circumstance they tend to take advantage of having fewer children. The following interview excerpts contain some of the views in this respect.

My family had two female and eight male children and if you compare the number of children I want to have in the future it is by far less than this [he expects to have 4 children]. In the past, especially in rural areas, a boy or a girl who reached age 18 would be pressured or forced to marry early for different reasons. This is no more the case for urban areas. In urban areas people are expected to have their own job and income and to fulfill that they sometimes wait until they reach ages 30 or 40 before entering into a marital relationship (25 years of age, single man, Addis Ababa).

Yes, there is a change. When we compare to our parent's time for example my mom has 11 children. Can you see the difference? [the respondent has two children which is also her expected number of children] I think the reason for the difference is education (40 years of age, married woman, Bahir Dar).

Compared to my mother's time, lots have changed. There is the question of child up bringing. Now we take special care on how to educate our children. For instance, in the previous time there was subjugation on women. Not to send them to school. But nowadays we do not want girls to stay at home. There is progress in terms of encouraging girls to attend school and get jobs outside. This was not the trend before (28 years of age, single woman, Jimma).

Some participants mentioned that there is a change in people's attitude that contributes to the development of small family norm in urban areas.

Yes, there is change. In our family we were many in number, my family was not willing to use any contraceptive method and their religion also doesn't allow that. But when we move to urban areas even if religious restriction is still there, they

get the idea that they can limit the number of children they want to have. This change has come due to education, learning from the experiences of others and observing their surrounding [influenced by their environment] (34 years of age, married man, Addis Ababa).

There is big change regarding the number of children people have. I can cite my own experience. My parents were married while they were still dependent on others. You can say they were “irresponsible”. My mother started to give birth at the age of 16, it was not well thought out. Nowadays we have reached to an age where people have good knowledge and awareness about family planning. They take their income into account before giving birth to a child (28 years of age, single woman, Jimma).

## 8. DISCUSSION

Since the childbearing experiences of Ethiopians vary significantly according to their residence, this paper aims at looking into the possible factors that may have contributed to the remarkably lower family size preferences among urban residents. Having children is still accorded great value in the culture. Intentionally remaining childless is a behavior which receives the disapproval of the vast majority. This is true even in the face of clear constraints. There are some who proposed that people should not have children in cases of severe economic hardships or poor health, while others, and they represent the majority, who proposed that there should at least be a minimum number (either a child or two), regardless of difficult circumstances. In this respect urban residents are not very different from their rural counterparts who are presumed to be pronatalist. People want to have children in most cases to “see their own eyes with their own eyes” as they argue. This is a common way of justification that exists across the society. Just as in other settings, children are also treated as a source of happiness and insurance against old age insecurity. While children are more important to men in terms of passing on their name and having an inheritor, for women they are seen as social glues

that help them get accepted by their husbands' extended family and the community at large.

In terms of attitudinal differences, the evidence showed that most respondents disapprove of large families. Many respondents defined small family sizes with similar numbers as their own ideal and expected family sizes. The evidence presented in this study indicated that urban residents prefer smaller family sizes. This is to a large extent related to household economic hardships, and to make use of services that enhance child quality (especially better schooling). Respondents also relate smaller families to the rise in age at marriage and at first birth, due to the longer time individuals would like to spend investing in their own human capital. People consider allocating higher per capita resource per child as a strategy towards preparing their children in the competitive urban environment. The proper education of children has become especially very important for urban residents, to enhance the success of their children. This can only be realized with a small family size.

To use the term from Watkins (2000), it can be concluded that a common “culture of reproduction”, different from the one that has existed a generation ago, is surfacing in urban areas. Respondents explained that they have observed a difference in the number of children people used to have in the time of their own parents and grand parents time. Their own generation is mentioned as having smaller numbers of children compared to the earlier times. As can be concluded from the views of the majority of respondents, the reproduction model of the generation ahead of them was based on the principle of “a child can grow in its own destiny”. Accordingly large family sizes were promoted through the norms and the cultural ideals of the society. This view anticipates less

uncertainties and risks, other than child mortality. For rural residents, this model of reproduction may still be dominant. On the other hand, urban residents are adopting a new model of reproduction that is justified in terms of their taste for a higher life style, and their strong desire of enhancing the social mobility of their children. At the same time, for the vast majority, children continued to have immeasurable value. The basis of this alternative model is the principle of “having children but making sure theirs’ and self’s social mobility is achievable”. The ideal behind this model is “not too many nor too few children” (Beaujot, 2004:11) as evidenced by the average ideal and expected numbers of children which are 3.1 and 2.8 respectively for the participants of this study. Especially when it comes to getting married, there is the common view that one should be able to support a family, and ensure that children have the necessary means for success. Respondents often express a "bottom line" that they want their children to do as well as the parents, and preferably better than the parents. Controlling the number of children is a means of achieving these goals.

Education, enhancing women’s status, taste for an elevated life style, and economic hardships are mentioned as factors that contribute to the shift towards small family size preference by urban residents. In particular, the changing taste for a higher life style by parents, and for their children, in the face of economic hardships, put pressure on people’s reproductive choices. At the same time, people are under pressure from societal norms and cultural values with regard to decisions on their desired family size. As this study shows, urban residents, by way of responding to the pressure from economic constraints and hoping success in the social ladder, are slowly freeing themselves from the social norms and values that promote large family sizes. They are

increasingly adapting values that encourage smaller desired and achieved fertility in order to avoid risks that arise from uncertain economic circumstances and the difficulties of achieving upward mobility.

### **Acknowledgements**

Financial support for the fieldwork was provided by the International Development and Research Centre (IDRC) through a Doctoral Research Award (no. 100427-99906075-054). The author also wishes to thank Professor Roderic Beaujot for his support in this study, and all respondents who gave so generously of their time.

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