

WORLD FERTILITY SURVEY CONFERENCE⁽¹⁾

Family Planning Associations, demographic conferences, abundant literature on birth control and family planning, many local and international activities taking place in both developed and developing countries, are presently focused on population problems which people everywhere must confront.

UNESCO, which created in the seventies a special fund for population activities and sponsored studies and publications dealing with this topic, has recently published a book in English, translated into Arabic, on «Population Education: A Contemporary Concern», based on an international study of the conceptualization and methodology of population education.

In Egypt, a «Supreme Council for Population and Family Planning» was established in 1973, with a research office and quarterly review entitled, «Population Studies».

The World Fertility Survey: International Statistical Institute, has been effecting general fertility surveys, including those of over 40 developing countries, which will be completely published by the end of 1981. The already published papers of World Fertility Survey (WFS) are widely used as a source of information about many aspects of child-bearing, marital status and contraception. Recently, 7-11 July 1980, a World Fertility Survey Conference was held at the Wembley Conference Center in London, where «more than 700 population scientists and policy-makers from 93 countries gathered to discuss the findings and policy implications of the WFS, an international survey programme involving some 35,000 women in 41 developing and 19 developed countries.»

Since the WFS Conference directly involves developing countries, including the Arab world, and in accordance with Al-Raida's interest in publishing up-to-date information on family planning and population studies⁽²⁾, this article attempts to condense the major findings and conclusions of that Conference.

The population problem affects mainly third world countries where fertility rates rank highest and population problems are more difficult to handle. According to Dr. Milos Macura, WFS Project Director, the survey has found solid evidence of changes in fertility. In 16 out of 20 countries for which results are now available, it has given evidence of fertility declines and signs of change in both attitude and practice.

1. There is a large unsatisfied demand for family planning in nearly all countries surveyed by WFS, but though women may be willing to use contraceptives, many have no access to them because of the shortage of clinics or difficult communication.

2. In 12 out of 15 surveyed countries, over 30% of women surveyed said that their last birth was unwanted. Between one-fifth and one-quarter of currently

married women stated a desired family size lower than actual size.

3. The rising age of marriage (23-25 years) has played a major part in the reducing of fertility in a number of Asian countries, particularly Republic of Korea, Malaysia and Sri Lanka. Marriage postponement, however, cannot by itself bring about moderate or low fertility rate without heavy use of birth control.

4. Breast-feeding, prolonged by 5 months, adds an average of five to ten months to the interval between births. In countries where there is little use of contraceptives, the duration of breastfeeding is an important factor in determining variability in the level of fertility within marriage. Surveys show that prolonged breast-feeding is common in Asia. The duration tends to be reduced with increasing education and movement toward urban areas, but the reduction is often compensated by increased use of contraception.

5. Among the factors affecting fertility, it was found that labor force participation of women had the strongest influence on the level of child bearing. Women who work outside the home have smaller families. The importance of this factor is lessened by prospects of future unemployment and underemployment resulting from rapid increase of population in third world countries.

6. Education is the primary key to reduced fertility. In most countries, particularly in Latin America, fertility declines with increasing length of the education of couples. However, schooling is not a pre-requisite for adoption of contraception and reduced fertility. In many Asian countries, women with a few years of schooling have the same fertility rate as women who have never been to school.

7. Surveys have shown that decline in fertility is correlated with the level of contraceptive use. In those countries in the WFS programme where fertility declines are non-existent or negligible (Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan), the level of contraceptive use is less than 10 per cent. However, the survey shows that the relationship between the level of contraceptive use and the sharpness of fertility decline is not constant for all countries, because in some of them this practice may be counterbalanced by other factors.

8. A dramatically increased use of voluntary sterilization as a means of ceasing child-bearing is shown by 19 surveys carried out by WFS. Among the countries reporting more than 15% sterilised for contraceptive purposes are Panama, Fiji, Costa Rica, and the Dominican Republic. In three of them, one out of five currently married women 30 to 34 years old, has been sterilised for contraceptive purposes.

9. Data available from WFS show that over 40% of married women aged 35 to 39 in rural areas, have used contraception in 13 out of 20 countries surveyed. Even in Jordan, where the fertility rate is very high, nearly half of all uneducated married women aged 35 to 39 have used contraception.

10. While it is often suggested that high fertility levels

(1) International Statistical Institute, 35-37 Grosvenor Gardens, London, U.K.

(2) See Al-Raida Sept. 1977, No. 2, p. 10, Feb. 1978, No. 3, p. 7, Feb. 1980, vol. III, No 11 pp. 3-10, Nov. 1980, No. 14, p. 7-9, Feb. 1981, vol. IV, No. 15, pp. 9 and 14, May 1981, No. 16, p. 5.

are a natural response to high levels of child mortality, recent research has suggested that fertility declines can begin without evidence of declining infant mortality. Further research is needed for the explanation of unexpected results along this line.

SPECIFIC EXAMPLES

WFS surveys have augmented the evidence concerning fertility declines in developing countries. Most of those that have been surveyed have experienced declines ranging from 15-50% during the last decade. They include Costa Rica, Columbia, Dominican Republic, Indonesia, Jamaica, Peru, Republic of Korea, and the Philippines.

In Thailand, 2 in 5 couples use contraceptives.

Sri Lanka, in spite of low per capita income, has achieved the lowest fertility and mortality levels in Asia.

Tunisia has made remarkable family planning progress by ensuring available contraceptive service in urban and rural health clinics.⁽¹⁾

Kenya (Africa) has the highest birth rate in the world: 8 children per couple as an average. Though contraceptive knowledge is widespread, only 7% of currently married women are using any method at the time of the survey.

Jordan, the first Arab country to join the WFS, continues to have large families: one in 3 women aged 45-49 have had 11 or more births. Education has contributed to reduce the number of children per family; contraceptive use by 26% has led to a fertility decline of 17%.

Egypt's rapidly growing population is expected to double in 26 years. «Reasons for the apparent increase are now under study», says Gamal Askar, president of the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics. «Currently 23% of married women are using contraceptives. That figure must be raised to 35% if Egypt is to meet its goal of reducing the birth rate from 40 to 30 per thousand.»

CONCLUSION

Even with fertility declines documented in 16 out of the 20 countries which have completed WFS surveys, the fact that women want an average of four children indicates that relatively high rates of population growth may continue in many developing countries.

Between 1978 and the year 2000, the world's population is projected to grow by 50%, resulting in a total of 6000 million people. Most governments favour slowing population growth. Some 81 per cent of third world people live in countries that want growth slowed, while 16 percent live in countries satisfied with their current growth rates, and only 3 percent live in countries that want faster growth. Most third world governments have initiated policies facilitating use of modern birth control methods, and this has had a major effect on birth rates.

(1) See *Al-Raida*, Nov. 1980, Vol III, No. 14, p. 7 on abortion in Tunisia.