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Asia's recent fertility decline and prospects for future demographic change

Ronald Freedman

Between the late 1960s and the late 1980s, Asian fertility fell by 39 percent, or 62 percent of the way toward the population-replacement level of 2.1 children per woman. Fertility declines have been quite general throughout the region: by 1990, nearly two-thirds of Asian countries had experienced declines of at least 25 percent. Nine out of 10 Asians live in those countries.

Qualified observers did not expect that in Asia's poor and populous countries fertility would fall substantially or contraceptive prevalence rise rapidly in just two decades. Six poor Asian countries with strong national family planning programs—Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam—collectively have a contraceptive use rate of 64 percent and total fertility rates (TFRs) ranging from 4.5 to 2.1 children per woman. Together, they account for 76 percent of Asia's population.

China, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam, the four poor countries with the largest fertility declines, have, in addition to strong family planning programs, two important development indicators—low mortality and high adult female literacy. China and Indonesia have reached and mobilized their peasant populations. India's moderately strong program is not always well implemented in the field, and national mortality and illiteracy rates remain high. The great anomaly is Bangladesh, which, despite high mortality and low female literacy, has had a substantial fertility decline, with 45 percent of couples now using contraceptives. Two other poor countries, Pakistan and Nepal, still have high mortality and low female literacy. Their family planning programs are ineffective, and fertility remains high.

Six countries in East and Southeast Asia already have below-replacement fertility. For Hong Kong and Japan, the explanation is social and economic development combined with private family planning services. For South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, and Thailand, it is broadly based development combined with strong family planning programs. Ideas about family planning and new life-styles, carried by modern communication networks, are thought to play a role; but in some of these countries traditional familial values persist despite low fertility rates. The movement from replacement to below-replacement fertility has resulted from delayed marriage and increased singlehood, linked to women's improved status. The rise in age at marriage is temporarily exaggerating the amount of fertility decline, as measured by the conventional TFR.

West Asia has the highest fertility in the region, but even here fertility has declined by more than 20 percent. Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Turkey, with declines of 23–55 percent, have moderately low mortality and moderately high female literacy. In Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Yemen, which have much lower female literacy, fertility declines have been more modest.

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