

Title

Fertility Decline, Women's Status and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs):
Evidence from Bangladesh

Synopsis

Despite increasing women's participation in the labor force and non-government organization (NGO) activities, the majority of women in Bangladesh have yet to be empowered to participate actively in the social, cultural, economic and political life of the country. Gender discrimination is still widespread at different levels, especially in education, health, employment and income opportunities, control over assets, personal security reveals that women are deprived and less empowered, which limits the country's ability to achieve its full potential. Despite national and international interventions, the status of women in Bangladesh is not yet up to the mark. Most of the women in rural areas have very limited interaction with the people outside of the home. They are not allowed to go outside alone and to talk with male strangers. This is isolating women from developmental activities, as well as, from generating knowledge, skill, income, etc., which makes it difficult for women to be economically and socially independent. Men decide almost all aspects of women's lives. Empowerment of women helps exercising free choice and right to control reproductive health. The policies and programs of the Government, some NGOs and other institutions do not sufficiently address the need for women's empowerment. Within this context this study is designed to examine the fertility-employment relationships and to explore the significance of women's status and the impact of women's status on reducing fertility. To identify the regional and time specific effect we have used time series and cross-sectional data, and the survey data

were utilized to identify the important factors which affect the women's status and fertility decline.

The objectives of this study are: (i) to examine the trends in female labour force participation and its role on fertility measured as total fertility rate (TFR); (ii) to identify the factors that significantly affected both women's status and fertility; (iii) to examine and isolate the major factors affecting contraceptive use and its effect on fertility; (iv) to examine the impact of NGOs, education and access to media on fertility and contraceptive use; (v) to investigate preference for male children and its impact on fertility and contraceptive use; (vi) to discuss policy implications and making recommendation with the aim of achieving a further decline in fertility in light of the findings.

The findings of this study, based on both district-level and micro data from 1974 to 2001, indicate that the NGOs have contributed to the increase women's status, especially employment status, and consequently to enhance the effect of women's employment on fertility decline. From the study we notice that the NGOs spread their network in the 1980s in the countryside where more than 80% of women live. We found that the elasticity between fertility and female employment increased in the time period 1981-1991 than 1974-1981. Changing the cross district relationships between fertility and female employment is most likely to a combination of two elements: First, the presence of unmeasured district/region specific factors and second, district/region heterogeneity in the magnitude of negative time series association between fertility and female employment. Regional NGO activities had an important role in changing the relationship between fertility and women's employment in different broad regions of the country.

The study shows that the desire for an additional child was lower among women who are working and also involved in NGO activities. Most of NGO variables are positively related with mobility and decision-making indices. The women under the activities of the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), Grameen Bank (GB) and other organization have lower demand for additional children than that obtained from the

women under the activities of the Bangladesh Rural Development Board (BRDB). The enrollment in secondary education and exposure to mass media substantially increase the use of contraception and consequently exert an influence on fertility decline. Women's membership of NGOs, urban residence, number of surviving male children, and employment status are other factors associated with increases use of contraception and decline in fertility. Interestingly, the effects of media and NGOs varied accordingly to the urban-rural residences. While the television was found to have significant effect on fertility and contraceptive use among both urban and rural women, the effect of radio and NGOs was exclusively felt among the rural women.

The policy implications of the findings are that the policy makers should emphasize those policies that actively enhance women's status through education, as well as getting them involved in the workforce in the country and need to encourage NGOs to adopt family planning and education programs as BRAC and Grameen Bank are doing. It is my conclusion that further acceleration in contraceptive use and fertility decline will require major efforts to improve women's status, more access to media and improved program efforts in the low-performing regions/divisions. The government should also attach greater priority to development in the social sector, including enhancement of women's status, especially through increased women's education and employment opportunities and improve access to media. Such efforts, in addition to their direct benefits, would accelerate the process of fertility decline in the country. Participation of the government, NGOs and the community is required to achieve these changes.