



PERGAMON

Social Science & Medicine 58 (2004) 1733–1749

SOCIAL
SCIENCE
&
MEDICINE

www.elsevier.com/locate/socscimed

Which African men promote smaller families and why? Marital relations and fertility in a Pare community in Northern Tanzania

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Abstract

This research comes in the wake of increasing interest in men's roles in childbearing decisions in sub-Saharan Africa. While some of the findings indicate that men tend to hinder fertility decline, we aimed to identify which men desire fewer children, under what circumstances, and why. The research was done in a Pare community in Northern Tanzania. It is our hypothesis that differences in men's fertility desires and decisions are to be sought in the context of their conjugal union. This paper, based on data from a case study from two Pare villages, attempts to examine the relationship between male attitudes toward reproduction and marital relations. The methodology consisted of a combination of an ethnographic study and in-depth interviews. A subsequent survey, the questions for which were derived from the qualitative work, was administered in order to verify the generalisability of the findings of the qualitative work. Findings show that those men who desire fewer children are younger, educated at least to the primary and often to the secondary level, their wives have also completed at least primary school, they are more affluent, and they are likely to be Christian. They are in a marital relationship where the partners chose each other, they communicate with their wives about important issues, and make joint decisions, including the number of children they should have. The discussion relates the differences in the marital patterns and fertility preferences to differences in the life plans of Christians and Muslims in this community.

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Keywords: Fertility decline; Contraception; Social organisation; Conjugal bond; Tanzania

Introduction

After a long history of neglect of the male role in fertility and family planning (Greene & Biddlecom, 2000), the past decade has witnessed an increasing recognition in the demographic literature that it is crucial to understand men's role in reproductive decisions since these are rarely made by women alone (Adamchak & Adebayo, 1985; Bankole, 1995; Bankole & Olaleye, 1993; Bledsoe, Lerner, & Guyer, 2000; Doodoo, 1993, 1998a; Ezeh, 1993; Isiugo-Abanihe, 1994; Lasee & Becker, 1997; Mbizvo & Adamchak,

1991; Meekers & Oladosu, 1996; Mott & Mott, 1985; Ngom, 1997; Renne, 1993; Renne & Bankole, 1996). This recognition was also reflected at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (United Nations, 1995) and the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 (United Nations, 1996), both of which stressed the need to involve men in reproductive health initiatives.

The influence of males in reproductive decisions is particularly great in sub-Saharan African countries, where males tend to dominate within the lineage, control property, have authority over family members, and benefit from an ideology of male superiority (Ezeh, 1993; Isiugo-Abanihe, 1994; Renne, 1993). Since in these

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circumstances there is an unequal flow of child costs and benefits to the genders and it is men who gain economically and socially from having a large number of children, not surprisingly, male attitudes have been considered to be one of the factors that influence the maintenance of high levels of fertility in sub-Saharan Africa. In fact, most research on the topic in the region confirms that men, in general, desire a higher number of children than women (Bankole & Olaleye, 1993; Doodoo, 1993; Ezeh, 1993; Isiugo-Abanihe, 1994; Kritz, Gurak, & Fapohunda, 1992; Mbizvo & Adamchak, 1991; Meekers, 1992; Mott & Mott, 1985). Yet there is evidence that this is not true in all cases and in all circumstances, and that there are African men who desire a relatively small number of children and who wish to control their fertility (Bankole, 1995; Basu, 1999; Doodoo, 1998a; Fapohunda & Todaro, 1988; Larsen & Hollos, 2003). As Greene and Biddlecom suggest in their recent review article, “in some cases the differences among men, whether by age or other characteristics, in reproductive attitudes may be greater than differences between men and women” (2000, p. 104). In spite of this, to date, there is very little data on the social and economic conditions which might be behind these differences and on the characteristics of men that influence their reproductive desires. As Doodoo suggests, “clearly, we must investigate the bases of reproductive decision-making power, as well as the determinants of men’s preferences” (1998a, p. 239) given the importance of men’s role in reproductive decisions. The question is, which men are likely to want fewer children than their counterparts, under what circumstances, and why?

It has become increasingly clear that no satisfactory response to this question will come from large-scale survey data that relies on Demographic and Health Survey-derived questions without including culturally relevant qualitative work which provides insight into the dynamics of male–female relations, as these are grounded in their cultural contexts. The study reported here is based on the qualitative investigation of spousal relations and a subsequent survey designed to verify the findings of that work. This research was conducted in northern Tanzania, among the Pare, a group of traditionally patrilineal highland cultivators who inhabit a range of mountains bearing their name. They are one of the two major ethnic groups in Kilimanjaro Region; the other being the better known Chagga. In this ethnic group, in recent decades, local ecological and economic stress and consequent migration away from hoe cultivation to wage labour have brought about a change in social relations and a shift away from reliance on patriarchal authority to a more couple-centred relation within some households.

Tanzania appears to be an ideal location for studying male reproductive attitudes for a number of reasons.

A persistent decline in fertility has been observed there in recent years (Hinde & Mturi, 2000). The total fertility rate has declined, age-specific fertility is lower at all ages and it is evident that Tanzanians have begun to postpone the initiation of childbearing to older ages. The reported ideal number of children has declined for both men and women. Countrywide, men still want more children than women, with currently married men desiring 6.7 children as opposed to currently married women, who want 5.9 children (1996 TDHS, 1997, p. 192). The average number of desired children for monogamous men is 6.1, a figure not substantively different from that of women.

Since the country is characterised by a pronounced regional variation in reproductive behaviour, with signs of a fertility transition being more pronounced in the Kilimanjaro Region, this area seemed to present itself as the appropriate location for a detailed analysis of male attitudes and decisions concerning fertility and fertility control. In this region, contraceptive prevalence of all methods was 29.3% compared to only 5.3% in Shinyanga Region, and 4.5% in Mara calculated from the 1999 Tanzania Reproductive and Child Health Survey (1999 TRCHS, 2000). According to calculations from the same source, the Kilimanjaro Region includes the largest fraction of couples who approve of family planning. Regarding attitudes toward family planning, in Kilimanjaro Region, both spouses approve in 69% of the couples, the wife approves and the husband disapproves or the wife is unsure of the husband’s attitude in 10% of the couples. There are no couples that include a wife who disapproves and a husband who approves or the wife is unsure of the husband’s attitude, and in only 1% of the cases do both spouses disapprove. Fifty-seven percent of married women in Kilimanjaro had discussed family planning with their partner more than twice, the highest level of spousal communication in the country. There is evidence also that the level of education is particularly high in this area, with less than 6% of the total population having no schooling, the lowest in Tanzania.

Of the two major ethnic groups in Kilimanjaro Region, the Chagga and the Pare, we chose the Pare for the purposes of the present study for two reasons. First, the two groups have similar levels of fertility, with an average number of 3.1 children for the Chagga and 2.9 for the Pare, calculated from the 1996 TDHS (1997). Second, whereas the Chagga have been extensively studied by a number of researchers (for example, Moore, 1986; Setel, 1999; Stambach, 2000), the Pare were much less known.

It is our hypothesis that differences in men’s fertility desires and decisions are to be sought in the context of their conjugal union. This paper, based on data from a case study from two Pare villages, attempts to examine the relationship between male attitudes toward

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