

Qualitative Analysis of Marriage Pattern and Family Size: A Study of Urban Punjab

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ABSTRACT

A study was designed to explore the marriage pattern, procreation, family values and family size in urban Punjab (Pakistan). For achieving the objectives, qualitative study consisting of seven focus group discussions – two groups of users of modern method of contraception and one group of non-users of any method of contraception from each city of Faisalabad and Lahore along with one group of local religious leaders (Imams Masjid) – was conducted. From discussion, the tendencies for marrying children at younger ages and having large families have been observed. It is concluded that social, moral, political and economic and religious belief systems define, control and direct the issues like marriage, childbearing and family size. Many participants and Imams viewed that early marriage and unrestricted procreation have been supported by the religion. So, there is a need to create awareness among the people about the teachings and principles of Islam about marriage, procreation, family formation and parents' responsibilities concerning children socialization because Islamic view point on family building and family formation is very comprehensive, not rigid.

Key Words: Focus Group Discussion; Childbearing; Marriage Pattern

INTRODUCTION

The literature review on the subject indicates that so many factors such as social, cultural, survival chance of children and economic influence the decision making-process regarding family formation and family building. Economic benefits such as old age security, financial contribution from children to their parents are reported in the economic theories of fertility (Arnold *et al.*, 1975; Caldwell, 1976; Lee & Bulatao, 1983; Eaterlin, 1985). With respect to net contribution in economic terms, the exact calculation of children's contributions is a difficult task because the value of children activities varies widely with the local situation and with different numbers and characteristics of children (Potter, 1983).

The same fertility rates for urban and rural areas of Pakistan as well as for developed and less developed provinces reported in Pakistan Demographic Health Survey (1991) provide an indirect support to the idea that net flow of economic benefits from children to parents is not a matter of consideration. The insignificant impact of the costs-benefits approach on fertility behaviour in Pakistan (as clear from the same levels of fertility in urban and rural areas) in explaining fertility behaviour in Pakistan indicates that other aspects of the institutional setting are also potentially important. The persistent high level of fertility in Pakistan in the presence of limited opportunities for employment and smaller farms (encounter low returns to incremental labour) in Pakistan (Rukanuddin *et al.*, 1986) is evidence in favour of cultural

ideology in shaping fertility behaviour. The large family preferences have been also seen in the socio-cultural perspective. Traditional settings, traditional and orthodox view point about family life, limited women autonomy, discriminatory treatment with the female children and unawareness from the Islamic teachings and principles about family formation are the prime forces responsible for rapid population growth and for large family size in Pakistan (Zafar, 2002).

The prime objective of this study was to explore marriage pattern, purpose of marriage, family size and importance of children in life through focus group discussion.

METHODOLOGY

The information for this study was generated through focus group discussions (FGDs) in the light of procedures/ explanations described by previously (Demeny, 1980; Folch-Lyon & Trost, 1981; Scheater, 1981; Stycos, 1981; Knodel *et al.*, 1984; Krueger, 1988; Morgan, 1988).

Selection of focus groups. Separate sessions for discussion were arranged for non-users and users with slight change in the interviewing schedule selected for discussion. There were two groups of users of modern methods (excluding sterilization) from each city of Lahore and Faisalabad, two groups of non-users of any method one from each of these cities and one group of Ulemas/Imams of the two sects the 'Sunni' and the 'Ahlhadees' from Faisalabad. It is more likely that the

views of women about marriage pattern and different aspects of family life are influenced greatly by the local religious leaders (Imam Masjids) through their presence in the localities and through speeches. This will also enable the researcher to know to what extent the Ullemas views (Religious leader) are affected by government policy. Altogether seven groups of users, non-users and Ullemas were conducted.

Selection criteria of participants. The PCPS (1984-85) and PFS (1975) provide evidence that large family norms are a feature of the Pakistani society. Therefore, homogeneity of participants in socio-economic conditions is broadly defined because the purpose of the study was to explore cultural dimensions relating to fertility and contraceptive behaviour. The fecund women (to the best of their knowledge and having a birth within the last five years) with at least two living children, of age 25-45 years were selected for the FGDs. The women bearing these characteristics were more likely to be using contraception and would be relatively more open to discuss these matters, in a country where vast majority do not use family planning methods. The reason for excluding women of age 46-49 was: the older women were at end of their childbearing, perhaps would have problems with memory recall, and may feel embarrassment to talk on topic like contraception in the presence of relatively young women.

Selection of moderator, observer and note-taker. Female university students from the M.Sc. course in Rural Sociology were selected as moderator, observer and note-taker. Recruitment was carried out at the University of Agriculture of Faisalabad. The same interviewing staff was used in both Lahore and Faisalabad. The Ullemas session was conducted by the investigator with the help of colleagues. Intensive training was provided to the moderator, observer, and note-taker with the help of colleagues. Every effort was exercised to create a non-threatening climate in which participants can express and exchange their views, opinions and perceptions openly for the FGDs. The discussion guide was developed with slight changes for each of the three categories, i.e. the users, the non-users, and the Ullemas.

Conduct of the discussion. The session with the users of modern methods was arranged in family planning clinics. Six eligible respondents were selected who came to the clinic to get their services a few days before the scheduled meeting along with two extra candidates, named as reserves to minimize the risk of drop-out due to some emergency or refusal. The respondents were informed that they were to participate in the discussion on family life and health facilities within the next few days at the same place. One day before the discussion, candidates were reminded.

The participants were invited to sit down in a room which was selected for the FGD and wait for others. Upon

the arrival of each candidate, the moderator introduced her to other participants. When all participants arrived, the moderator shed light on the significance of the topic. The candidates were briefed about the family life and family planning. The respondents were also informed that their discussion would be recorded because it would be very difficult to write down their views in such a short period. The recorded discussion would provide the facility for verification and elaboration of views and opinions. The participants were requested to speak as honestly as possible. It was also explained that there was no need to be influenced by other's opinions as there was no right or wrong answer - we just wanted to know your opinion on the issue. All opinions and comments would be welcomed equally. Every participant should take part in discussion with full confidence because information obtained during the session would be kept strictly confidential.

Once it was ensured that an open atmosphere was developed through the selection of women who did not know each other, by encouraging comments of all types, and by stressing that there would be no judgment by the moderator on any views, the discussion was started. At the beginning of the session, introductory information was requested on socio-economic and demographic factors, such as age and age at marriage of participants, education of participants and their husbands, occupation of participants and their husbands, income of the family, children ever born, living children, desired family size, and desired number of sons. Most participants of the sessions expressed their views very frankly and elaborated their views during the discussion. They seemed to enjoy the discussion. Some of the respondents pointed out that they cannot leave their children with their neighbours for a long period, particularly those who belonged to nuclear families.

The recruitment of the non-users of any method was made in the same area where the users of modern methods of contraception lived. Women were selected for the focus group interviews who qualified on the same criterion as mentioned earlier. The selection of the respondents was carried out through systematic random sampling. The meeting was arranged in the same area in the house of one of the participants. The discussion time was about the same as prescribed for the focus group interviews with the users of modern methods.

The moderator was advised to use unstructured probing. The probing was made by using the words/phrases "why", "Could you explain more", "what is your idea", "I could not understand, Could you explain again", etc. It has already been mentioned that an unstructured questionnaire was designed for the discussion, but the moderator was advised that it was not necessary to follow this rigidly. Probing should be made to explore more deeply ideas, views, and opinions according

to the situation and environment in which the discussion was proceeding. The moderator was also advised not to make any personal comments on the opinion of any participant during the discussion. The main points of the discussion were recorded by the note-taker during the discussion. The main description and findings presented here are based on tape recorded information. Every effort was made to keep the meaning the same as that reported by the respondents. The discussion was conducted in the Punjabi language (local language) and translated into English.

The discussion guide consisted of four main issues. In the first part the socio-economic and demographic conditions of the participants are asked, the second part was designed for exploring the family and family values (normative beliefs, familism)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The participants' views- users of contraception, non-users of contraception and ullemas about age at marriage, purpose of the marriage, family values and family size are described to know the significance and importance of family life in Pakistani society.

Age at marriage. Early marriage, especially for females, is the norm in Pakistan. For the users of modern methods, the ideal age at marriage was around 22 years but their actual age at marriage was younger than this age. The non-users of any methods believed that the ideal age at marriage for woman should be around 19. All respondents except for two (users) from each of the two areas agreed that a woman's marriage should not be later than at 25 years.

It was noted from the discussion with users that they do not support the idea of early marriage due the stigma attached to delayed marriage. The majority of the participants (users of modern methods) supported the idea of later marriage from the view point of physical and mental maturity. They stated that completion of education, and sufficient over all maturity are the important issues for a successful family life. They explained further that a mature woman has a good sense of responsibility for running the home business and for tackling family issues. A mature woman understands the behaviour of members of the new family, especially the father and mother-in-law. She treats well the family elders and wins the sympathy of the husband and other family members and secures a good place for herself in the new house. A young woman may be lacking in these qualities and she can produce many children in her early age of innocence, before

understanding these issues. One participant (user) from Faisalabad expressed that "In my opinion a woman should not marry before 25. If marriage occurs before that age, the woman faces the heavy burden of children before adjusting to a new environment. The understanding of the husband's behaviour and family issues are other problems. A woman who has a marriage at a matured age, she is wise enough to understand the new life and her responsibilities in a new environment".

Most non-users of any method and a few users, particularly those who had no schooling pointed out the social implications of late marriage as well as the religious responsibility of early marriage. Many discussants frequently expressed that if a girl is of 'heavy' (over) age, no parents would like their son to marry that girl because she would not look pretty and smart, having at that time a wrinkled face. Impression also developed from the non-users' discussion that early marriage protects the society from illicit sex. One non-user expressed that "The parents of those having heavy age girls cannot expect good 'Rishta' (suitable husbands) for their daughters. Parents who come to see the girl say that your girl is looking old". The Ullemas views on the issue were more strict than non-users. The Ulema/Imam Masjid of the two sects i.e. the Sunni and the Ahlay-Hadis supported the concept of early marriage of girls on religious grounds and condemned the strategy of late marriage. They emphasized that young age at marriage is one of the prime factor and unique solutions for keeping the social atmosphere pious and sublime. In the view of one religious leader "it is the basic and prime responsibility of parents to marry their daughters as soon as possible after attaining the age of menarchy. If parents intentionally delay marriage of their daughters, they deviate from the Islamic principles and commit a sin".

Early childbearing. Discussion revealed that cultural ideology was the prime factor to force and shape couple's attitude towards early childbearing. Early childbearing was seen in terms of femininity, masculinity, respect, power and sterility. Although most users and some non-users who had eight or more years of schooling favoured the idea of late childbearing 'a little bit', the general impression of respondents was to have the first baby very soon after marriage. The participants expressed that early birth of a child clears the clouds of misunderstanding and confirms one's femininity and masculinity. The concept of woman's destiny which lies mainly in her early procreation is also achieved. A woman achieves more respect and power by ensuring the continuity of the family line and by fulfilling the expectation of the in-laws. A woman also ensures her marital stability and reduces the fear of divorce

by producing children as early as possible. Early childbearing cancels the fear of permanent infertility which is very dangerous for a woman in Pakistan. A childless woman is pitied and her future prospects are considered dark and bleak. Early childbearing is not only a woman's desire, but also that of her husband. This ensured the husband's self-image as a complete man in the society. A childless man is often seen as indicative that he lacks manliness and could become the object of sympathy and ridicule.

Those who were in favour (most users from both localities) of delaying having a baby i.e. after two or three years of marriage expressed the social and family reasons. They explained that during the early period of marriage, a husband and wife can enjoy each other without the worry of looking after children. This is supposed to increase love and mutual understanding between husband and wife. They also supported their views for not having a baby too early in terms of mental maturity and mother's health. They also suggested that a young woman who may be mentally immature can not look after the baby well. An early start to childbearing can end in too many children which are not suitable for the family and society. One user from Faisalabad said "a woman, particularly the one who is young, should not have a baby very soon because she is immature. She can not look after the baby properly. The early days of marriage are very useful for enjoying newly married life. I present the picture of my own life. I was married at a young age. When I was in a position to understand my surrounding, I was under a burden of very many children, and looking after them was another huge burden. Actually these days were supposed to be for playing, laughing and enjoying. Early marriage and too many children in the young age are basically responsible for taking away the pleasures and happiness of my life".

As for the Ullemas views on the issue they expressed that there is no place for contraception to limit and space births in Islam. Planning to have a birth after a period of time is purely an unislamic action. They elaborated their viewpoint by saying that although marriage facilitates legal sexual enjoyment for spouses, it is mainly concerned with procreation and family formation.

Family size. The reported ideal family size for the users of modern methods ranged from 2 to 4 children with high clustering at three (two boys and one girl). The mean ideal family size was three, but the actual mean family size was greater than this figure. The ideal family size reported by the users of modern methods was significantly lower than that reported by the non-users of any method. The preferred family size for the non-users of any method was varied from 3 to 6 with high clustering at four (two boys and two girls). Although information on the ideal family size was obtained in figures, some non-users adopted a

fatalistic attitude about the issue. They expressed that the determination of ideal family size was not within the limits of human beings- this is best known by the Almighty. The belief was much stronger among illiterate non-users.

All Ullemas expressed that decisions about the number of children are not within the authority of human beings. The decisions about the number of children are taken by God, who is the procreator. They firmly explained that there is no need to limit children from the fear of food shortage because God is responsible for providing all the basic necessities of life. One Imam who had a master degree in Islamic studies stressed that "it is not within the control of human beings to increase or decrease the number of children. One Imam adopted quite an extreme view and stated that thinking about limiting children is an action punishable by God. He stated that "Creator is God. To whom He desires gives more and to whom He desires gives less. Any one who attempted and attempts to stop the process of childbearing, he is committing sin and crime from the Islamic view point. He is criminal and punishable."

Value of children. It emerged from the discussion that psychological and emotional benefits were attached for having children. The majority participants expressed that 'children are better than wealth' and children are inevitable and indispensable. No one participant (even highly qualified) desired to live childless. The economic benefits of having children with respect to both current contributions and security for the parents' old age are the most salient features for the non-users and illiterate users. They also expressed that children particularly daughters help parents in household tasks such as sweeping, fetching water, washing, baby-sitting, and preparing food, from an early age. The responses of participants pinpointed the importance of religious, moral, natural, social, familial and economic factors for having children.

There was a widespread belief that procreation is a natural, moral and religious obligation of couples. Respondents also believed that marital romance and sexuality is not only the purpose, but the prime aim of marriage is procreation which preserves the continuity of the family and society. The participants in all sessions expressed that a family without children is incomplete, unhappy, and unlucky. There is no charm in life without children. The concept of the family is only understandable in terms of children, otherwise it is vague. Following are impression of some of the participants: "A family without children is not a family. Families finish without children and ultimately the society. Children are a blessing of God. Their mischievousness provide charm and happiness in the house". "Children lovely talks, their small demands and innocent complaints create a beautiful environment in the home. Such an environment develops love and harmony

between husband and wife". "Children are flowers. These flowers spread the smell of pleasures in the home which makes the home environment beautiful".

Children are not only a source of pleasure. They are also the essential element of solidarity of marital relations. The concept of marital communication can only be viewed in terms of children. A childless woman is not well respected by the husband and the family members. A childless couple thinks that they are deprived of the blessing of God. Childless women always remain under the threat of divorce. These were the views of most of the non-users. Gravity of the childbearing is quite apparent from the non-users' views.

"Children are essential for a happy and stable marital life. A childless woman has to listen to many blames from the mother-in-law and sister-in-laws". "What is the benefit of a childless woman? She is not more than cattle. She is born with misfortune". It particularly emerged from the discussion with users that many children are economically costly because higher educational requirements and limited family income. Moreover, participants with more than eight years of schooling aspire to have better educated children which envisage higher expenditure per child.

Ulemas viewed procreation as the religious and moral responsibility of couples. Procreation is very important to strengthen the family, the society and the 'Muslim Umma' (Muslim nation). One Imam said: "A Muslim couple should produce many children to increase and strengthen the 'Muslim Umma'".

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

It is concluded that children constitute an important ingredient of a happy and normal family life. Economic and symbolic values are attached with individual's belief system about marriage, procreation, family and the purpose of life. Children and parenthood have been valued within the framework of cultural ideology. Procreation - the prime aim of marriage - is viewed in terms of social, moral, political and economic and religious belief system. It can be drawn from the FGD that family values and marriage pattern are best understood within the framework of cultural ideology. Traditional beliefs, values, norms and traditions play a vital role in the development of attitudes towards family norms, procreation and family size. Islam does not support the idea of unrestricted procreation. Islam is more concerned about quality rather than quantity of children. This is why Islam makes parents responsible to provide children with social, cultural and moral training as

well as physical care and health care. There is a need to make people aware about the Islamic principles regarding marriage, purpose of marriage, procreation, parent's responsibilities about children socialization. There is also need for arranging training programs for local religious leaders focusing on Islamic view point and doctrine about family building and formation.

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(Received 11 April 2003; Accepted 23 May 2003)