

## Married Women, Family Size And Fertility Behaviour

By

Rita Giacaman  
Community Health Department  
Birzeit University  
1993

### Executive Summary

It has been argued that the rate of population growth of Palestinians living in the Occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip is one of the highest in the world, and has continued to remain high despite suggested evidence that infant and child mortality - one of the determinants of fertility - have continued to fall over the years<sup>1</sup>.

The question of human reproduction and fertility is an especially important issue to Palestinians, as it is associated with the struggle for survival, and in this sense, assumes significant political and socio-cultural connotations. Prevailing political and popular ideology calls for having large families as a matter of resistance to occupation through the demographic factor, and to compensate for the death of children through army violence. In addition to the political argument, calls for having large families also stem from a deep rooted financial insecurity. Because of loss of the land, dispossession and dispersion, and the general financial insecurity of living under occupation, children have become the security of old age. Thus, the more, the better, as the financial and social burden of old age can be distributed over many and can be guaranteed. Yet, despite this prevailing ideology, in fact, evidence suggests that fertility rates have been falling gradually over the years<sup>2</sup>.

The central question here is: what are some of the factors that prompt people to have large families, and are these 'choices' that people make rational, perhaps reflecting the context, options and limitations within which they live?

While the international literature on the subject appears to be saturated with conflicting evidence of the influence of various types of socio-economic determinants, some of those are largely agreed upon as important in determining fertility. In addition to declining infant mortality, the decline of fertility has been associated with urbanization and the consequent rise of age of marriage, and therefore, reduction of period fertility rates<sup>3</sup>, the education of women<sup>4</sup> and their increased ability to determine their own fertility<sup>5</sup>, the decline in the economic benefit of children relative to their costs, in conditions of increasing landlessness and a shrinking labour market<sup>6</sup>, the breakdown of extended kinship networks, where social and economic success is increasingly achieved outside the sphere of kinship, decreasing the demand for children and, therefore, lowering fertility<sup>7</sup>, and the increasing prevalence of contraceptive practice and the provision of family planning programmes<sup>8</sup>, among other influences<sup>9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16</sup>.

Utilizing data selected from Fafo's national sample survey of 1992, and initial picture of family size in the Occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip was elaborated in relation to selected socio-economic determinants. The results were as follows:

1. In line with findings of other studies of Palestinians living in the Occupied Territories, a trend of decreasing family size with decreasing age was noted, probably indicating reduced fertility over the years.
2. However, and possibly because of the political instability that this country has faced during the last few years, the previously observed trend of increasing age at first marriage may be reversing. As in this study, age of marriage was identified as one of the important determinants of family size, it is likely that this commonly noted and possible reversal will have its impact, if all else remains constant, in the form of larger families.
3. Although the data suggests decreased death experience of children over the years, experiencing the death of children continues to affect a sizeable proportion of women, where 40% of all women and 28% of fertile women in this sample reported having experienced the death of at least one child. Given an estimated Infant Mortality Rate of 43 deaths per/1000 live births for the late 1980's that was calculated by this author utilizing the Fafo data, and in view of the fact that child death experience was found to be an important determinant of family size, it is likely that people will continue to opt for larger families, until the incidence of deaths in infancy and childhood is reduced.
4. The level of education of women was consistently found to be of importance in determining family size. Even when controlling for the effects of age - as the educational levels of women have improved over the years - educated women tended to marry older, have less children who eventually die, use contraceptives more often, seek prenatal care services more regularly, and have smaller families than less education women. Whether these effects are due to education independently of other factors or whether education is part and parcel of a specific life style and consciousness is a question worth future investigation.
5. Accessibility - availability and distance from domicile - appears to be an important factor determining the level of use of prenatal and family planning services. Those who are at most disadvantage are rural women and women from the south of the West Bank, reflecting the inequitable geographic distribution of these services in the country today.

In conclusion, it is worthwhile to note that a Palestinian population programme - encouraging people to either have larger or smaller families - needs to be conceived not in terms of 'pushing ideology or contraceptives' on people, but rather in terms of assisting people in making choices that are rational and compatible with their needs. A successful population programme needs to come to grips with the problems of early marriage and childhood deaths; it needs to tackle the problem of women's education and right of choice for couples; it also needs to ensure the availability and accessibility of maternal and child health services for all. Perhaps then the Palestinian nation would head towards a healthy future.

1. Hill, A., The Palestinian Population of the Middle East, **Population and Development Review, Vol.9, No.2, June, 1983**
2. Scott, A. and Tamari, S., 'Fertility of Palestinian Women between the National perspective and Social Reality', Women's Affairs,, No.1, 1991 (In Arabic).
3. For an interesting discussion of urbanization, delayed childbearing and fertility see Zeng, Y. and Vaupel, J., The Impact of Urbanization and Delayed Childbearing on Population Growth and Aging in China, **Population and Development Review**, 15, no.3, September 1989, pp.425-444
4. See, for instance, Hollos, M. and Larsen, U., Fertility Differential Among the Ijo in Southern Nigeria: Does Urban Residence Make a Difference, **Social Science and Medicine**, Vol.35, No.9, 1992, pp.1199-1210
5. For a discussion that raises serious questions about this argument see Oppenheim Mason, K and Malhotra Tak, A., Differences Between Women's and Men's Reproductive Goals in Developing Countries, **Population and Development Review**, Vo.13, No.4, December 1987, pp.611-634
6. Thomas, N., Land, Fertility and the Population Establishment, **Population Studies**, 45, 1991, pp.379-397
7. Turke, P., Evolution and the Demand for Children, **Population and Development Review**, Vo.15, no.1, March 1989, pp.61-90
8. Westoff, C, Moreno, L and Goldman, N, The Demographic Impact of Changes in Contraceptive Practice in Third World Populations, **Population and Development Review**, 15, No.1, March, 1989, pp.91-104
- <sup>9</sup> Hill, A., The Palestinian Population of the Middle East, **Population and Development Review, Vol.9, No.2, June, 1983**
- <sup>10</sup> Scott, A. and Tamari, S., 'Fertility of Palestinian Women between the National perspective and Social Reality', Women's Affairs,, No.1, 1991 (In Arabic)
- <sup>11</sup> For an interesting discussion of urbanization, delayed childbearing and fertility see Zeng, Y. and Vaupel, J., The Impact of Urbanization and Delayed Childbearing on Population Growth and Aging in China, **Population and Development Review**, 15, no.3, September 1989, pp.425-444
- <sup>12</sup> See, for instance, Hollos, M. and Larsen, U., Fertility Differential Among the Ijo in Southern Nigeria: Does Urban Residence Make a Difference, **Social Science and Medicine**, Vol.35, No.9, 1992, pp.1199-1210
- <sup>13</sup> For a discussion that raises serious questions about this argument see Oppenheim Mason, K and Malhotra Tak, A., Differences Between Women's and Men's Reproductive Goals in Developing Countries, **Population and Development Review**, Vo.13, No.4, December 1987, pp.611-634
- <sup>14</sup> Thomas, N., Land, Fertility and the Population Establishment, **Population Studies**, 45, 1991, pp.379-397
- <sup>15</sup> Turke, P., Evolution and the Demand for Children, **Population and Development Review**, Vo.15, no.1, March 1989, pp.61-90
- <sup>16</sup> Westoff, C, Moreno, L and Goldman, N, The Demographic Impact of Changes in Contraceptive Practice in Third World Populations, **Population and Development Review**, 15, No.1, March, 1989, pp.91-104