

# Quantity-quality tradeoff in Fertility planning among uneducated couples at Malda District of West Bengal, India

## Abstract

There is a dearth of researches which captures couple's perception behind fertility planning and aspiration about their own child's educational attainment during fertility planning. It is imperative to know whether and how the quantity-quality trade-off exists during fertility planning, especially among the rural uneducated couples. Using both quantitative and qualitative data, this paper attempts to observe the perception behind child bearing and to know whether fertility planning is based on the quantity-quality tradeoff during decision making or not. Findings indicated that rarely rural uneducated couples decide anything about their family size. Children's educational aspiration is not a motivational factor to reduce family size, rather when they face financial problem to provide basic facilities to children, only then they stop having additional children which results a large family size. A well designed behavior change program among the uneducated rural couples so that they can plan fertility in better and effective way.

## 1. Background

It came out from most of the existing literatures that the researchers still debate whether the association between family size and schooling can be best viewed as the expression of a deliberate and endogenous parental trade-off (Becker 1981; Montgomery and Kouame 1993; Montgomery and Lloyd 1999) or the true consequence of an unintentional and exogenous consequence of per capita availability of resources (Blake 1981; Blake 1989). While this debate is often framed in opposing terms, they may not be mutually exclusive. It is hard to argue that parents consider the welfare of their children in making fertility decisions, especially illiterate parents of rural areas from a developing country like India. But it is equally hard to overlook the counter-arguments against a strict endogenous interpretation of fertility-schooling relationships. Many couples have only a limited control over their fertility and, therefore, they generally end up with more children than intended (Knodel and Wongsith 1991; Montgomery and Lloyd 1999; Westoff and Bankole 2000) in a developing country situation. Even with adequate planning, multiple births (twins, triplets, etc.) can occur and they are identified as a clear occurrence of unintentional or unplanned fertility (Rosenzweig

and Wolpin 1980; Black, Devereux, and Salvanes 2004). Prospective parents are also limited in their economic foresight and thus, children's resource environment can change significantly over the time as they grow older depending on the economic situation of that time (Bhat 2002). Furthermore, the feature of trade-off as a decision-making principle may vary across societies.

A study shows that in Africa, parents do not envision their fertility choices as a simple trade-off between bearing and better educating a few children versus bearing and inadequately educating many. Rather, they "can have many children and educate a high proportion of them, as the older children can join the workforce and bear the financial expenses of the education of their younger siblings" (Gomes 1984). A reduction of family means a reduction in the earning in this case, rather than a quantity/quality trade-off. Even where a trade-off is planned, it is still meaningful and useful to examine the actual link between fertility and education outcomes of children. As Blake (1981) has pointed out that people may have fewer children in order to have better quality ones, but whether they are really increasing the quality in practice or not need to be observed. Again, the trade-offs in the reproductive decisions may varies across places and times and there are a little scope to know how much subsequent relationships between fertility and schooling are causal versus endogenous or simultaneous (Eloundou-Enyegue and Williams, 2003)

## **2. Data and methodology**

A mix method approach has been applied using both quantitative sand qualitative survey. The primary quantitative survey data was collected using a semi structured questionnaire. The questionnaire is divided into eight sections. Section 1 is for collected the information to identify the household along with the information of religion and caste. General household level information was collected in Section 2. General information such as, current age, age at marriage, husband's age at marriage, mass media exposure etc. were collected from the eligible women (who have at least one child between ages 6-17 years) in the Section 3. Section 4 is for collected the information about the birth history of the women and Section 5 is about the fertility preference, decision and perception. Contraceptive related questions were asked in Section 6 and last two sections Section 7 and Section 8 were kept separately to gather information about child schooling. Parent's perception and aspiration about child schooling was trying to captured through the questions in the Section 7, while Section 8 is the

child schedule where all the information for each child and if not going to school then reasons for school discontinuation etc were asked.

The quantitative survey was done based on a multi stage cluster sampling approach. In qualitative -two focus group discussion (FGDs) were also carried out – one among older women and one among the younger women to substitute the findings from the quantitative survey.

### **3. Results and discussion**

#### **3.1. Profile of the respondents**

The primary survey consists of a total sample of 414, i.e., total 414 mothers were interviewed in six villages of Bhagabanpur and Krishnapur panchayets in a block Kaliachak-III, Malda district of West Bengal. The sample was so selected that it contains both illiterate parents and at least one child in the age group 6 to 17 years. Table 1 presents some selected socio-economic characteristics of the surveyed women or respondent. The results show that, 79 percent of the total respondents belong to Hindu religion and the rest are Muslim.

Around 43 percent of the 414 respondents belong to scheduled castes and 3.6 percent belong to the other backward castes and more than 53 percent of them are from General category. Most of the respondents (96 percent) are working besides their own household work to financially support their family at the time of survey. Only 4 percent respondent reported that they are only housewives.

When it was asked to them whether they work throughout the year or seasonally, it came out that only around 22 percent of the women work throughout the year and around 62 percent of them work seasonally. Rest of the women (16 percent) reported that they also work occasionally once in a while whenever time permitted or they get chance of earning. Further enquiries show that 95 percent of the women works as a “Bidi-binder” (making hand made cheroot/cigarette from tobacco leaf) or as household servants and seasonally they also work in the mango gardens and agricultural fields during the harvest season. More than 46 percent and 23 percent of respondents reported that the main occupation of their husbands is “Bidi binding” and other secondary work and farming on their own land respectively, whereas 13 percent of the women’s husbands are working as daily wage labourer and only 8 percent are work as agricultural labourer in other’s land.

**Table 1: Socio-economic profile of the women respondent**

<i>Socio-economic Characteristics</i>		<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<b>Religion</b>			
	Hindu	327	79.0
	Muslim	87	21.0
<b>Caste</b>			
	General	222	53.6
	Scheduled castes	177	42.8
	Other backward castes	15	3.6
<b>Current working status of respondent</b>			
	Working	397	95.9
	Not working	17	4.1
<b>Working for earning wage</b>			
	Yes	390	94.2
	No	24	5.8
<b>Work through out the year or seasonally</b>			
	Throughout the year	89	21.5
	Seasonally	258	62.3
	Once in a while	67	16.2
<b>Husband's occupation</b>			
	Bidi-binding and other secondary	192	46.4
	Daily wage labourer	53	12.8
	Agricultural labourer	33	8.0
	Farmer	97	23.4
	Various jobs whatever available	39	9.4
<b>Usually listen to radio at least once a week</b>			
	Yes	173	41.8
	No	241	58.2
<b>Usually watch television at least a week</b>			
	Yes	58	14.0
	No	356	86.0
<b>Usually go to cinema hall or theater once a week</b>			
	Yes	6	1.4
	No	408	98.6
<b>Total number of respondent</b>		<b>414</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Information regarding mass media exposures is captured through asking the respondent -whether they listen to radio at least once a week or not, whether they watch television at least once a week or not and whether they go to cinema hall or theater at least once a week or not. It emerged from their responses that going to watch a movie in the cinema hall is not a usual thing for them, most of them occasionally, may be a few times in a year, go to cinema hall. Less than 2 percent women said that they usually go to cinema hall once in a week. May be due to the fact that the cinema hall is not nearby though one video hall is there, where the males usually go.

Only 14 percent women answered that they usually watch television once in a week. The reason behind this small percentage is that, not every household owned a television and so the access to the television either in own home or in other's home is also restricted. In the same point of view, as more number of household possessed radio or transistor, so exposure

to radio media, i.e., listening radio at least once in a week is more (around 42 percent), compared to other mass media.

**Table 2: Demographic profile of the women respondent**

<i>Demographic characteristics</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<b>Age of respondent</b>		
<i>Mean age</i>		<b>32</b>
Below 25 years	51	12.3
25-29	56	13.5
30-34	173	41.8
35-39	82	19.8
40-44	22	5.3
45 -47	30	7.2
<b>Age of respondent's husband</b>		
<i>Mean age</i>		<b>38</b>
Below 30 years	32	7.7
30-34	58	14.0
35-39	160	38.6
40-44	81	19.6
45-49	41	9.9
50-55	42	10.1
<b>Age of respondent at marriage</b>		
<i>Mean age at marriage</i>		<b>17.0</b>
13- 14	48	11.6
15-17	203	49.0
18-19	91	22.0
20-24	51	12.3
25-29	21	5.1
<b>Age at marriage of respondent's husband</b>		
<i>Mean age at marriage</i>		<b>24.0</b>
19-21	148	35.7
22-24	158	38.2
25-29	73	17.6
30-34	35	8.5
<i>Mean Children alive</i>		<b>3.32</b>
<b>Number of children alive</b>		
1	64	15.5
2	91	22.0
3	135	32.6
4 and more	124	30.0
<b>Experienced child death</b>		
Yes	84	20.3
No	330	79.7
<b>Ever had still birth</b>		
Yes	39	9.4
No	375	90.6
<b>Ever heard about contraceptives</b>		
Yes	390	94.2
No	24	5.8
<b>Used anything to delay child birth or to stop child bearing</b>		
Yes	289	69.8
No	125	30.2

Demographic profile of the respondents is explained in Table 2. This sample contains women in the age group 23 to 47 years and their husbands in the age group 27 to 55 years at the time of survey. The mean age of respondents at the time of survey is 32 years and their husband's mean age is 38 years. Lowest age at marriage for respondents is 13, while it is 19 years for their partner. The entire respondent married before age 30 and for their husbands it is 34 years. The overall mean age at marriage for women is 17 years and for the men it is around 24 years.

The mean number of living children is around 3.32. Almost 63 percent women have at least three or more alive children and around 20 percent of the women experienced any child death and more than 9 percent women have given still birth. Though almost 94 percent of the respondent heard about contraceptive methods but only around 70 percent of them actually used any contraceptive method to delay or stop child bearing.

#### **4. Child schooling decision, fertility decision and their relationship**

Table 3 shows the fertility decision related information collected from the mothers. The question was asked that whether the respondent ever discussed the issue of how many children she should have or she would like to have with her husband or anyone else. This information is very important proxy to capture whether the family size planning has taken place or not. It also came out from a study by Acharya and Surender (1996) that, the mean number of children ever born was less for the group of couples who had discussed the number of children they want between them, suggesting thereby that positive communication between spouses can bring down family size. The outcome of the present study shows that more than 73 percent of the parents of the total 1411 children aged 6-17 years, discussed about the number of children they would have with husband or with any relatives or friends. When the question was asked about the planning of the timing of child birth or when she should have birth, it came out that around 62 percent of the parents planned about the timing of having child i.e. they thought about birth spacing.

To understand the fertility decision making process more clearly more information were collected from the respondent regarding their 'fertility decision making'. When the mothers were asked about who has taken the decision of birth regarding each child, almost 95 percent reported that the decision was a joint decision by both the parents, and the rest (only 5 percent) mother think that it is customary to have a child or it is not decided or the birth was unplanned.

**Table 3: Fertility decision and planning related information collected from the respondent mother who has at least one child of age 6-17 years**

<i>Fertility decision</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
<b>Discussed about the number of children to have with husband or anyone</b>		
Yes	1035	73.4
No	376	26.6
<b>Planned about timing of having child or birth spacing between child</b>		
Yes	871	61.7
No	540	38.3
<b>Who has taken decision about birth of this child?</b>		
Customary	58	4.1
Both husband & wife	1340	95.0
Not decided anything, just happened	13	0.9
<b>When the decision of birth of this child was made?</b>		
After marriage it is customary to have a child	502	35.6
Not decided anything	784	55.6
Thought after having last birth	120	8.5
When last child entered school	3	0.2
Others (other family members wanted)	2	0.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>1411</b>	<b>100.0</b>

This is a contrasting fact, as almost 27 percent women responded that they never discussed about child bearing with husbands or anyone and around 38 percent women said they never planned about timing of child birth. When the same mothers were asked about the timing of the decision made for each child, around 56 percent reported they had not decided anything and another 36 percent reported that it is customary to have child after marriage. Only in case of around 9 percent children they planned about their birth.

These above mentioned ambiguity between the answers about the planning of child bearing and the timing of the decision being taken suggest that in majority of the cases the fertility among these parents is not planned at all, which is also supported by the findings from other studies. It is found that in general, most couples do not discuss anything about when to have their first child, birth spacing or contraception (Gupta *et. al.* 2001, Khan and Patel, 1997). Studies also show that most of the husbands approve the use of contraception only after having a second or third child (Khan and Patel, 1997) and husbands' approval of using a particular method is important (Praveen *et. al.*, 1995). Many studies explained the fertility or reproductive decision making scenario of India, keeping in mind that reproductive decision-making is often beyond the control of young women and their husband. It is influenced by the senior men and women or in-laws in the family and sometimes influential people in the community (Bhat 2002b, Santhya 2004). This result is further supported by the

outcome of the discussion in FGDs, when issue raised about the fertility planning or whether they ever tried to plan their family size and what are their attitude about fertility decision making. Some of the responses of the women during the discussion are given bellow for illustration.

**Issue:** What is your opinion about family size and family planning? What is your experience about family size decision and family planning?

*"I have two girl children and I do not want any more, but my husband and mother-in-law does not allow me to take anything, even not allow me to meet with "didi" who distribute pills, as she wants one boy child from me."* -**24 year old women, mother of 2 children**

*"It is customary to have children after marriage and having at least 2 boy children is important. If anything happens or one boy will not look after you in your old age, then another boy will be there."* -**48 years old, mother of 5 children**

*"In our days we never used to discuss anything related to how many children we should have. Now there are 'didis' (health worker) coming to our home and are giving pills to the women, but in our time we never used to have such things."* - **42 years old women, never used contraceptive**

*"My husband's income is not sufficient to run our family, so I have to work as household servant. I don't want to have a big family, so after having two children I have not taken any more children. But due to opposition from my in laws I have not gone for operation"-* **23 years old women having one girl and one boy child**

*"I heard that using pill for a long time may cause infertility, so I didn't use anything and after having my last child (fourth) I did operation"-* **37 years old used only sterilization**

*"Once I used pills, but I became very sick, even I couldn't do my usual household work. I was vomiting and had dizziness after taking the pills. So I stopped taking those. And using pills is the only easy way as I can get those in my home, as health workers came to distribute these."*-**27 years, mother of three children**

*"It is easy to use pills as we are getting it easily in our home but if we have to go to purchase it from some shop we can not do this, we can not say it in front of others, specially men. I kept it secret and I know many women who are also doing the same"-* **a Muslim women, 24 years old have 2 children**

From the discussions it is found that there are many reasons and obstacles for the women to take the decision about family size or to control their family size by using contraceptives and these are well established by the previous studies. Thus it can be said that, in most of the cases the fertility planning is absent and a very small proportion of the women are able to plan or decide their family size.

As there were two FGD groups one formed with older women of age 35 years and above and another with younger women below 35 years of age, it is found from FGDs that most of the older women aged above 35 did not use any contraceptives and have comparatively larger family size; they now realize the benefits of smaller family, while young women with 2-3 children are more careful about not to have any child beyond their desired family size, though not all of them are able to control their fertility.

Seldom, the perception of a woman on why to have a child or not to have a child is discussed in general fertility research. Though in many earlier studies reasons for having a large family has been identified, but when the women think that they should or should not have a child or they decide to have a child or stopped child bearing, what are the situations or matters that influence them to take the fertility decision is important for this study. This may help in identifying whether the aspiration to send the child to school or the affordability of child schooling influence the decision or not and this will help in understanding whether the child schooling decision is influencing the fertility decision or not.

**Table 4: Perceptions of the women about why couples want to have a child collected from primary survey**

<i>Perception of women about why to have a child</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Rank</i>					
			<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
Other reasons (up to God/it just happened/a child brings happiness)	961	68.1	31.9	18.3	19.4	22.3	7.2	0.9
Customary as last child grown up	670	47.5	52.5	24.9	11.6	10.3	0.7	
Husband wants	446	31.6	68.4	12.5	17.0	1.3	0.9	
Job or employment situation of husband	318	22.5	77.5	10.8	6.1	4.9	0.7	
<b><i>Can afford to provide education</i></b>	<b>297</b>	<b>21.0</b>	<b>79.0</b>	<b>10.1</b>	<b>10.4</b>	<b>0.6</b>		
Husband's age (becoming old)	284	20.1	79.9	5.5	10.8	3.8		
Can provide child care environment	246	17.4	82.6	3.4	2.6	6.1	5.4	
Have helping hand in child rearing and caring	236	16.7	83.3	2.5	1.3	12.0		0.9
Desire for a son	180	12.8	87.2	10.9	0.6	1.3		
Desire for daughter	173	12.3	87.7	6.0	5.7		0.6	
Join job in future	161	11.4	88.6	3.6	6.3	0.9		0.6
Marital bond will be strong	96	6.8	93.2	5.1	1.7			
Woman's age (becoming older)	73	5.2	94.8	3.5	1.7			
Give child a brother/sister	72	5.1	94.9	0.9	0.4	3.0	0.9	

Have time for child rearing	54	3.8	96.2	3.5	0.4			
Can afford to have another mouth to feed	37	2.6	97.4	1.5	1.1			
Expectation from family	24	1.7	98.3		1.1	0.6		
Closer ties with family or society	24	1.7	98.3					1.7
No child in the family	24	1.7	98.3				1.7	

Among the different perceptions of women about why couples want to have a child, presented in Table 4, it is seen that 68 percent mother of all 1411 children perceived that other reasons which was not listed in the questionnaire, i.e., having a child is up to God's wish, or it just happened, or a child brings happiness in the family are most important reason to have a child. 'It is customary to have a child as last child has grown up' is the second main perceived reason (almost 48 percent) stated by a woman on having a child, followed by husband wants more children (around 32 percent) and job or employment situation of husband (almost 23 percent).it is found that only 21 percent of all the mother think that the affordability of education for their children may be one of the important reason when a couple think they will have a child. According to their ranking, among those 21 percent women, 10 percent of them think it as the main important matter and another 10.4 percent women think that it is the second most important matter.

**Table 5: Perceptions of the women about why couples do not want to have a child or stop child bearing, collected from primary survey**

<i>Perception of women about why not to have a child</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Rank</i>					
			<i>0</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>
Staying separately from husband (not cohabiting)	1008	71.4	28.6	48.2	23.2			
Joined job or working for earning	880	62.4	37.6	45.7	14.8	1.8		
Husband's age (became old enough to have a child)	638	45.2	54.8	3.0	38.8	3.4		
Husband do not want any more	297	21.0	79.0	7.2	8.2	4.5		1.1
Other reason-just like that/can not say	242	17.2	82.8			14.9	1.4	0.9
Job or employment situation of husband	184	13.0	87.0	4.7	4.5	3.8		
Not have enough time for child rearing	131	9.3	90.7		8.3	1.0		
Woman's age (became old enough to have a child)	42	3.0	97.0			3.0		
Can not afford to have another mouth to feed	32	2.3	97.7	1.5	0.1	0.6		
<b><i>Can not afford to provide education</i></b>	<b>22</b>	<b>1.6</b>	<b>98.4</b>		<b>1.6</b>			
Desire for son fulfilled	17	1.2	98.8	0.4	0.9			
Desire for daughter fulfilled	12	0.9	99.1			0.9		

When the women were asked about their perception about why people choose not to have a child, it is found in Table 5, that the most important and main reason is that they are staying separately from husbands (more than 71 percent), that is they are not cohabiting. This fact seems realistic as from the household level information is found that the number of rooms in the house is not sufficient for a large family. The women perceive that joining job or working for earning (62 percent) is the second major hindrance in having a child among the main reasons of not having a child, as perceived by women. But only 1.6 percent mother perceived that they cannot have another child because they cannot afford to provide education.

## 5. Conclusion

Seldom, the perception of a woman on why to have a child or not to have a child is discussed in general fertility research. Question was raised and tried to answer in this paper that whether the quantity-quality tradeoff is truly involve within the fertility decision making process or not. Child schooling will be more when family size is small as parents will have more resource per child to invest. But when the quantity-quality tradeoff is involved within the decision making process, the aspiration for child schooling or better quality children will restrict the parents to control their family size. But for the uneducated couples the decision is taken after facing some financial problem when they started feeling that now they cannot effort to have children because of they can't bear the cost of child bearing and child rearing.

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