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Why has fertility been increasing in Egypt?

Anne Goujon* and Zakarya Al Zalak**

A recent upturn in fertility has been observed in several Arab countries. This new trend is surprising and contradicts the demographic transition model. Is it linked to an increase in religiosity in these countries? Examining the case of Egypt, where the fertility rebound is very pronounced, Anne Goujon and Zakarya Al Zalak suggest that the high levels of unemployment among Egyptian women, the most educated in particular, may provide an alternative explanation.

The unusual fertility increase experienced by many Arab countries in recent years is particularly visible in Egypt where fertility declined very slowly after 2000 to around 3 children per woman, then started increasing again in 2008 to reach 3.5 (2014 EDHS). This contradicts the demographic transition theory and the earlier expectations of some scholars [1]. Increased religiosity in the wake of the Arab spring movements has often been mentioned as a possible reason for this upturn, but lack of opportunities for young – most often highly educated – women on the labour market is a more plausible explanation.

A fast increasing and large Egyptian population

Egypt has a fast growing population. Moreover it is the largest and most densely populated Arab country, with 95 million inhabitants in 2017. According to the Egypt Demographic and Health Surveys (EDHS) of 2008 and 2014, the total fertility rate (TFR) increased from 3.0 to 3.5 children per woman over the period, returning to the level recorded by the EDHS in 2000. In a country where demographic pressure is already very strong, this fertility increase raises environmental and economic concerns,

and threatens the well-being of Egypt's inhabitants, especially in the context of a faltering economy following the Arab Spring of 2011.

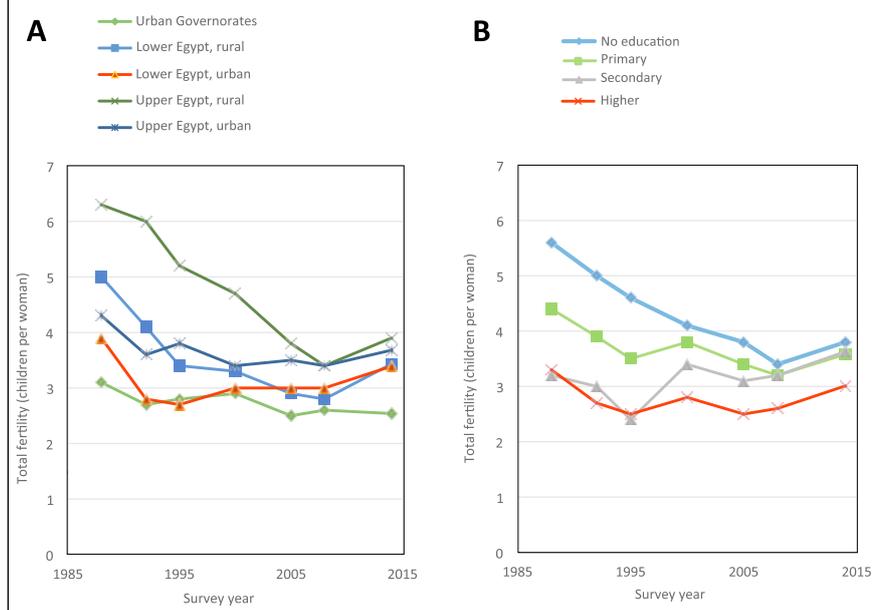
Fertility is increasing among all social and geographical groups

The most striking feature of the recent fertility increase in Egypt is that it applies to practically all segments of the female population, be it in urban or rural areas, in the generally poorer Upper governorates or the richer Lower governorates, or among the most or least educated (see Figure 1). Up to the 2000s, a process of convergence was observed between fertility in urban and rural areas. While rural fertility fell from the very high level of 5.6 children per woman in 1988 to 3.2 children in 2008, the latest survey in 2014 revealed a trend reversal (TFR of 3.8 in 2014). Urban fertility has remained quite stable at around 3 children. The TFR stood at 2.5 in 2014 in urban governorates strongly influenced by Cairo where more than 10% of the Egyptian population resides. During the period of fertility decline, the decrease mainly concerned women residing in rural Upper Egypt where fertility fell from 6.3 children in 1988, to 3.4 in 2008. Fertility in urban Upper Egypt remained stable, at around 3.5 children per woman. Between 2008 and 2014, the most rapid increase occurred in the rural areas of Lower and Upper Egypt. In the former, fertility increased from 2.8 to 3.6 children.

* Wittgenstein Centre for Demography and Global Human Capital (IIASA, VID/OEAW, WU), Vienna, Austria.

** Technological Statistical Institute, Damascus, Syria.

Figure 1: Fertility trends by governorates (A) and by education (B), Egypt, 1988-2014



Sources: EDHS 1988, 1992, 1995, 2000, 2005, 2008 and 2014
 Note: TFR takes into account the births that occurred during the three years preceding the survey. Urban Governorates include the cities of Cairo, Alexandria, Port Said, and Suez (with no rural populations). Nine governorates are located in the Nile Delta (Lower Egypt) and nine in the Nile Valley (Upper Egypt). The Lower and Upper Egypt governorates are further subdivided into urban and rural areas. Results are not shown for the five sparsely populated Frontier Governorates located on the eastern and western boundaries of Egypt.

age groups 20-24 (the ages of peak fertility in 2014) and 25-29. This pattern is unusual because in countries experiencing demographic transition, peak fertility tends to shift to older ages over time. Under current conditions, an average Egyptian woman would already have 2.7 children by her 32nd birthday, representing more than three-quarters of the total births she would have during her reproductive life.

Fewer women use long-term means of contraception

While married women’s contraceptive prevalence is quite high (practically constant at around 60% since 2000) and they do not have less knowledge of contraception or less overall access to family planning, the choice of methods has changed. In 2008, almost 60% of contracepting women used an IUD (intra-uterine device) and 20% the contraceptive pill. The 2014 survey reveals a considerable shift, with a drop in the proportion of women using the IUD (51% in 2014) and an increase in the share using the pill (27% in 2014). This trend is particularly acute among women below age 30, suggesting that more women are opting for a method which is easier to discontinue. This is happening in the context of stability in the family norm of Egyptian women, whose mean ideal number of children has been around three children since 1988 and varies little by age, region, and place of residence or level of education.

What has happened since 2008?

Women marry more frequently and at younger ages

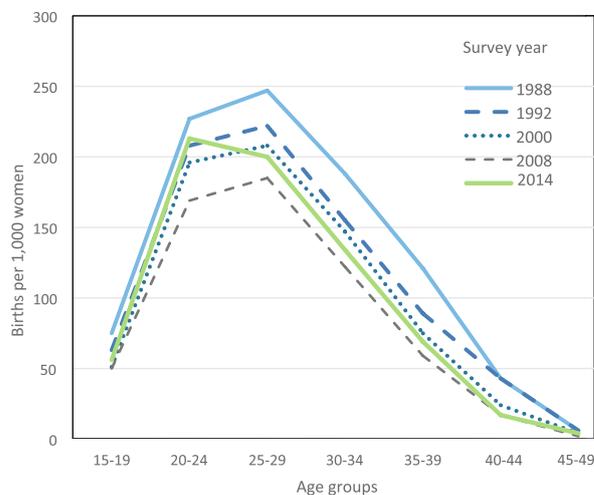
In Egypt, as in other Arab countries, marriage is nearly universal and linked to fertility. While the share of never-married women aged 15-49 had been increasing until 2005¹, it declined very rapidly in the two subsequent surveys (2008 and 2014). According to the most recent survey, it is now around 26%, lower than at any time in the last 25 years. As observed for fertility, most of this change occurred among women in younger age groups – from ages 15 to 29, and particularly among those aged 20-24. It is important to note that teenage marriage is still very prevalent in Egypt: in 2014, more than half a million girls aged 15-19 were ever-married, corresponding to 85% of the age group [3]. The median age at first marriage of the higher educated has been moving downwards since 1988, falling from close to 25 years in that year to around 22 years in 2014.

Women bear their children at younger ages

Until 2008, fertility within age groups decreased from one survey to the next, and most women had their children in the 20-24 and 25-29 age groups, with far fewer births at older ages (Figure 2). The 2014 EDHS shows a different pattern: the fertility of women in all age groups increased between 2008 and 2014, but strikingly for the

proportion of women using the IUD (51% in 2014) and an increase in the share using the pill (27% in 2014). This trend is particularly acute among women below age 30, suggesting that more women are opting for a method which is easier to discontinue. This is happening in the context of stability in the family norm of Egyptian women, whose mean ideal number of children has been around three children since 1988 and varies little by age, region, and place of residence or level of education.

Figure 2: Age-specific fertility rates (ASFR), Egypt, 1988-2014



Sources: EDHS 1988, 1992, 1995, 2000, 2005, 2008 and 2014
 Note: TFR takes into account the births that occurred in the three years preceding each survey.

¹ The divorce and widowhood rates remained at a constant low level (CAPMAS 2015).

Few women in work despite a high level of education

The explanation of the Arab Spring-and the political, economic and religious turmoil it provoked-does not really hold, as fertility had already stopped falling before the revolution, although it has certainly been a reinforcing factor in a country already affected by economic crisis. It is often posited that women are having more children as a result of increased religiosity in the population or that Egyptian society has become more conservative, with women being increasingly secluded in their homes. Although the Muslim brotherhood movement has been gaining ground in the population and even came to power in 2011-2012, values about the place of religion in people’s life did not change during the 10 years covered by the World Value Surveys between 2001 and 2012.

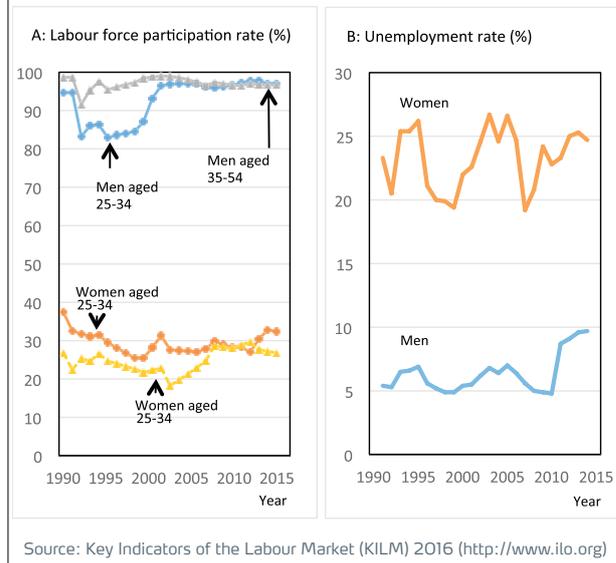
Moreover, young women’s levels of education have increased steadily throughout Egypt’s various political and economic crises [4] (Figure 3)

Possibly the most convincing explanation for the stalling decline and recent upturn in fertility is the change in the overall economic and labour market situation in Egypt and its impact on women’s lives and fertility behaviour.

Whereas the male labour market participation rate – i.e. the proportion of working-age men who are either working or looking for work – is close to 100%, that of women is very low, at 30% in 2014 according to estimates by the International Labour Organization (ILO), and has remained stable at

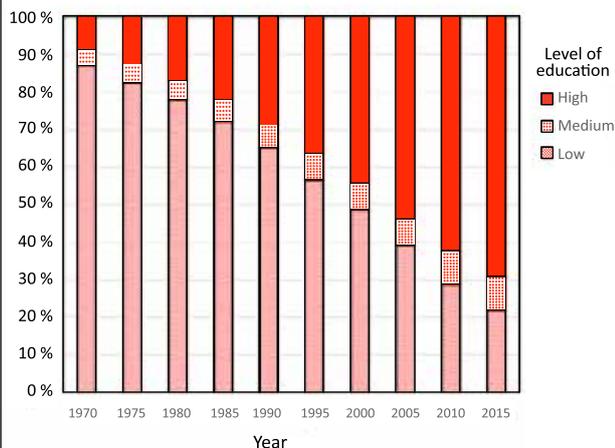
this level since 2000 (Figure 4). In parallel, unemployment has been high for some time and has even increased slightly in the last few years, reaching 25% for women and 9% for men in 2014.

Figure 4: Trend in labour force participation and unemployment rates, Egypt, 1990–2014



Strikingly, unemployment rates are higher on average for the highly educated than for the less educated population. The unemployment rate of women with secondary education or higher was above 24% in 2012, and above 32% in urban areas while that of women with less than elementary education was below 8%. The corresponding figures for men indicate much lower levels, with unemployment rates of 5-7% for the higher educated, and around 2% for the lower educated.

Figure 3: Level of education of Egyptian women aged 20-39 from 1970 to 2015



Source Wittgenstein Centre Data Explorer, Version 1.2. Available here: www.Wittgensteincentre.org/dataexplorer
 Note: The category low education includes women with no education or incomplete primary education; medium education includes women with a completed primary education or lower secondary education; and high education women with upper secondary and post-secondary education.

Why is women’s unemployment so high?

Until the late 1980s, the Egyptian economy was a vastly centralized planned economy. All educated Egyptians with a high-school level of education (graduates of vocational secondary schools and technical institutes) or with university degrees were guaranteed a job in the state sector [3]. As a result, parents pushed their children to acquire high education levels as a way to secure a permanent position and better working conditions in the public sector. Under the Mubarak regime (1981-2011), and the structural adjustment programme sponsored by the IMF and the World Bank in the early 1990s, the country adopted a package of liberalization reforms which (among other things) seriously constrained public sector employment [5]. This is one of the causes of the low labour force participation and employment levels of the more educated population, as families kept pushing their children to acquire high levels of education even though the public sector did not have the capacity to absorb all graduates [6]. While this accounts for the high unemployment rates among the most educated

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for both men and women, it does not explain why educated women are less likely to be in the labour force and less likely to be employed. One of the reasons is that women tend to choose fields of study that make them less employable. Female students still opt for traditional educational specializations such as education, arts and humanities, or social sciences, rather than more specialized fields better suited to the needs of the private sector [5].

The next reason is that most economic opportunities come from the informal sector dominated by low-quality jobs and a lack of protections and benefits [6]. The informal sector has become the norm, especially after the economic crisis reinforced by the Arab Spring. The impact of downturns in labour demand differs for men and for women. In the case of women, they often result in overall reductions in participation rather than simply an increase in unemployment, and this is particularly the case for educated women [5].

While these phenomena increase the numbers of people in a precarious situation and should thus lead to lower fertility, as was shown in Europe after the 2008 financial and economic crisis, the opposite has happened in Egypt. It is plausible that women who are faced with low opportunity costs and adverse conditions on the labour market may decide to enter marriage and bear their first child earlier than older cohorts of women, but without having more children overall. If so, this could lead to fewer births in the future once they have achieved their planned or ideal number of children.

The fertility increase observed in recent years in Egypt could mean that young (and mostly well-educated) women are taking advantage of a period where they are available and mostly out of work in order to have their children earlier in life. This could result in a decline in the near future, especially if women enter the labour force and become actively employed. This could depend on several factors, such as a shift in the educational specialization of women to make them more employable in the private sector, and policies to lower the labour market barriers faced by women.

As mentioned above, Egypt is not the only Arab country in this situation and some others – most notably Tunisia and Algeria – have been experiencing an unusual fertility increase since 2000. Economic stagnation and women's lack of access to the labour market are important factors behind these trends.

Abstract

After declining slowly to 3 children per woman on average in the mid-2000s, fertility in Egypt has risen back to 3.5 children in recent years. Women are marrying earlier and more frequently. They also bear their children at younger ages. Some argue that this reflects an increase in religiosity. The labour market difficulties of Egyptian women, the most educated especially, provide a more convincing explanation. Faced with a lack of job opportunities and a slack labour market, women may be deciding to marry and have children earlier than previous cohorts, though without wishing to have larger families. If this is the case, the number of births should fall when these women have reached their desired family size.

Keywords

Egypt, Arab countries, women, fertility, labour market, education, religion.

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