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Can policy influence low fertility?

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Abstract

While direct government intervention played little role in the historical decline in fertility in western countries prior to 1930, government policies were vital in the more recent falls in fertility in the developing countries. Thus, policy can influence fertility downwards but can policy be used to sustain fertility at moderate levels when fertility is low or increase it when it is very low? To address this question, we first need theory about the reasons for low fertility and evidence to assess theory. We then need to examine the potential range of policies that are in keeping with theoretical explanation of low fertility. Finally, we need to apply the selected policies and evaluate their outcome. Advances have been made in development of micro-theory (individuals) and there is a growing body of evidence to support these theories. However, experience of new policy initiatives based on theory and even more so, evaluation of their impacts, is near to non-existent. Policy development is still in gestation and policy implementation often yet to be conceived. I argue that two micro-level, theoretical perspectives, gender equity theory and risk-aversion theory, provide reasonable explanations of fertility decision-making at the micro-level in most low fertility countries, but that their impact and, more importantly, the potential for different policy approaches to deal with their impact is deeply modified by the cultural and economic setting. It is at this macro-level where understanding is as yet not well developed. In fertility policy, it is evident that one size does not fit all.

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