DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSITION IN ARAB COUNTRIES: A NEW PERSPECTIVE

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This paper provides a new perspective on the fertility transition in Arab countries. It shows that the story of Arab fertility must be retold: the story is of a region with the highest fertility preferences, exhibiting reluctance to change due to the stranglehold of cultural forces, and just starting to respond to development forces. The paper shows that Arab regional experience is quite comparable to that of other developing countries and that, though the fertility decline occurred at a somewhat later date, the pace of decline more than compensates for this delay. Furthermore, the probing of country level experiences and forces underlying the transition shows the diversities of these experiences and the exaggeration of the role of cultural specificity. It also demonstrates that a large part of the decline in Arab fertility is due to changes in nuptiality. For some segments of society and some countries, these changes are not paralleled by increased opportunities for women to have more fulfilling lives. For these women, the fertility decline is not necessarily improving the quality of their lives and cannot be equated with progress and development.

The story of fertility in the Arab region, up till the early 1980s, is widely known and quite simple: a homogeneous and unchanging region with the highest pretransitional regional average, whose high fertility showed no change, or at best a minor declining trend. During the period between the 1950s and the 1980s, and as a result of an appreciable decline in mortality, the Arab growth rates became among the highest in the world (Mauldin 1980; Fargues 1989). The lack of fertility change despite the satisfaction of key conditions that moved fertility to lower plateaux in other countries is noted frequently (Omran 1980; Nagi 1984). Furthermore, statements linking Islam to the exceptionally high fertility and in some cases mortality and to the resistance to change are abundant (e.g. Seklani 1960; Kirk 1966, both cited in Allman 1978:27; Caldwell 1986). The logic of the inevitable tie between Arabs and high fertility is reinforced by the experience of Arab oil-producing countries, which despite having the highest per capita incomes, continued to retain the highest fertility levels. A few studies (Arowolo 1973; Allman 1978; Obermeyer 1992) attempted to unlink Islam and high fertility. The discussion rested more on denying the presumed Islamic attitudes and on the expectation of forthcoming change than on documenting the actual fertility performance of Arab countries.

This paper criticizes the pooling of Arab nations into a single ethnicity-based entity with a common explanatory model governing the lack of fertility change. It first

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challenges the commonly held notion of the distinctiveness of the Arab experience in terms of deeply-rooted high-fertility desires shaped by religious and cultural values that resist responding to development forces of change. Secondly the paper notes the recent significant declining movement on the fertility front and documents the profound changes in family formation patterns driving this decline. It suggests that the nature and determinants of fertility change invite a closer look at the implications of such change on the well-being of women. In particular, it argues that, for many Arab countries, the fertility decline is not necessarily improving the quality of women’s lives and cannot be equated with progress and development.

The distinctiveness of Arab fertility experience: a re-investigation

In this section, empirical data are used to investigate whether the Arab fertility experience is truly distinctive from the experience of other developing countries and whether this distinctiveness can be attributed to cultural forces. Three questions are asked. Is pretransitional fertility of the Arab region, which was the highest among all regions of the world, a confirmation of highest fertility preferences? What are the distinctive features in the Arab transition when compared with other regional experiences? And how can any distinctive features be explained?

The high pretransitional fertility

The levels of fertility documented in the literature are not contested here. It is true that before the onset of fertility decline in the regions of the world, the Arab region had the highest regional average. However, the interpretation of this fact is debated. It is argued that the relatively high pretransitional level of Arab fertility does not imply higher fertility desires than those prevailing in other developing countries. Rather, it reflects a more homogeneous region in terms of the weak operation of non-parity-specific measures (other than breastfeeding) that inhibited marital fertility in other regions of the world.

The starting point is to refer to a recent study (Rashad 1997) that showed that fertility levels in Arab countries during the early 1950s were similar to almost half (54 out of 122) of the countries whose fertility transition had not started by that time, and that this similarity was not confined to countries within Africa, but included many countries in Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean as well as Oceania. In terms of pre-transitional fertility levels, therefore, Arab experience cannot be described as excessive. The same study identified that the major difference between the Arab region and other regions is that pretransitional total fertility rates (TFR) of Arab countries were closely clustered, while those of non-Arab countries exhibited much wider variation. Clearly, it is this clustering at high levels that results in the high Arab regional average.

Coale (1986) provided ample proof that the underlying determinants of the variant and moderate fertility levels — TFR from 4.1 to 6.2 — in pre-industrial European populations were non-parity-specific. European marriage patterns, involving late marriage and permanent celibacy, played a major role in inhibiting potential pre-industrial fertility. In addition, other forms of non-parity-specific limitation were operating. While other regions have not been subject to the same level of scrutiny that would provide solid interpretations of the variation in pretransitional TFRs, which