

3 Number of Children Desired

Perhaps the most common measure of reproductive preferences is the number of children desired or the "ideal" number of children. The question asked of childless women in the DHS is: "If you could choose exactly the number of children to have in your whole life, how many would that be?"¹ Women with children are asked the same question prefaced by: "If you could go back to the time you did not have any children . . ."

¹ The same question was asked of all women in the WFS.

3.1 INTERNATIONAL VARIATIONS IN THE NUMBER DESIRED

There is a wide range in the average number of children desired (Table 3.1). Within sub-Saharan Africa it ranges from a low of 3.9 for ever-married women in Kenya to a high of 8.5 in Niger. The average for ever-married women across the 15 sub-Saharan African countries is 5.8.

Table 3.1 Number of children desired, by marital status and number of living children

Mean number of children desired by women, by number of living children and marital status, Demographic and Health Surveys, 1990-94

Country	Date of survey	Number of living children ^{a,b}							Marital status			Percent giving non-numeric response ^b	Number of women
		0	1	2	3	4	5	6+	Ever-married	Never-married	Total		
Sub-Saharan Africa													
Burkina Faso	1993	5.5	5.6	5.6	5.7	6.1	6.4	6.4	5.9	5.0	5.7	26	6,354
Cameroon	1991	6.6	6.6	6.8	7.3	7.6	7.7	8.3	7.2	5.0	6.8	11	3,871
Ghana	1993	4.4	4.0	4.4	4.6	4.9	5.3	5.5	4.7	3.4	4.4	8	4,562
Kenya	1993	3.9	3.5	3.5	3.6	3.9	4.0	4.5	3.9	3.2	3.7	6	7,540
Madagascar	1992	6.1	5.0	5.1	5.3	5.7	6.5	7.3	5.9	4.6	5.5	8	6,260
Malawi	1992	4.5	4.5	4.8	5.2	5.6	6.0	6.4	5.3	4.1	5.1	14	4,849
Namibia	1992	4.4	4.1	4.3	5.3	5.9	6.6	8.5	5.7	4.4	5.0	9	5,421
Niger	1992	7.3	7.6	8.2	8.5	9.0	9.4	9.8	8.5	6.3	8.2	14	6,503
Nigeria	1990	5.5	5.5	5.7	6.1	6.1	7.0	7.2	6.2	4.9	5.8	66	8,781
Rwanda	1992	3.9	4.0	4.1	4.4	4.5	4.6	4.7	4.4	4.0	4.2	1	6,551
Senegal	1992-93	5.9	5.8	5.9	6.1	6.5	6.7	6.5	6.2	4.9	5.9	18	6,310
Sudan	1989-90	5.1	5.0	5.5	5.7	5.8	6.5	7.2	5.9	U	U	47	5,860 ^b
Tanzania	1991-92	5.8	5.6	5.9	6.1	6.5	7.1	7.4	6.3	5.2	6.1	14	9,238
Zambia	1992	5.7	5.4	5.4	6.1	6.2	6.6	7.2	6.1	4.9	5.8	7	7,060
Zimbabwe	1994	3.9	3.8	4.1	4.4	5.1	5.3	6.1	4.7	3.3	4.3	1	6,128
Near East/North Africa													
Egypt	1992	2.4	2.5	2.5	2.8	3.0	3.2	3.5	2.9	U	U	19	9,864 ^b
Jordan	1990	4.2	3.9	4.0	4.2	4.4	4.3	4.9	4.4	U	U	31	6,461 ^b
Morocco	1992	3.1	3.0	3.2	3.5	4.0	4.4	4.9	3.8	2.8	3.4	4	9,256 ^b
Turkey	1993	2.1	2.1	2.2	2.5	2.5	2.8	3.3	2.4	U	U	2	6,519 ^b
Asia													
Bangladesh	1994	2.2	2.2	2.4	2.5	2.7	2.7	3.0	2.5	U	U	7	9,640 ^b
Indonesia	1991	2.4	2.5	2.8	3.3	3.7	4.1	4.6	3.1	U	U	112	2,909 ^b
Pakistan	1990-91	3.9	3.9	3.6	3.8	4.2	4.2	4.6	4.1	U	U	61	6,611 ^b
Philippines	1993	2.9	2.7	2.9	3.3	3.8	4.1	4.6	3.5	2.8	3.2	11	5,029 ^b
Latin America/Caribbean													
Bolivia	1994	2.5	2.3	2.5	2.7	2.8	3.0	3.2	2.7	2.1	2.5	9	8,603
Colombia	1990	2.2	2.2	2.5	3.0	3.1	3.8	3.9	2.8	2.2	2.6	1	8,489
Dominican Republic	1991	2.6	2.7	3.0	3.5	3.6	3.8	4.0	3.2	2.7	3.1	2	7,320
Paraguay	1990	3.2	3.2	3.5	4.2	4.7	5.4	6.8	4.3	3.1	3.9	12	5,827
Peru	1991-92	2.2	2.1	2.4	2.7	2.8	3.0	3.3	2.6	2.2	2.5	21	5,882

U = Unknown (not available)

^a Includes current pregnancy

^b Ever-married women

In other regions of the world, the number of children desired is considerably lower. There is an interesting large difference in the mean number desired for Bangladesh (2.5) and for Pakistan (4.1), two countries with many cultural similarities. There has been an aggressive and comprehensive family planning program effort in Bangladesh, which appears to have influenced reproductive preferences as well as contraceptive behavior. No such effort has been mounted in Pakistan.

In all of the countries that included never-married women in the survey, the mean number of children desired for that group is lower than that for ever-married women. This may indicate a downward trend in reproductive preferences or perhaps that the never-married women, who are younger on average than the ever-married women, have not yet been exposed to the rationalization of unwanted births at the higher parities. It is evident from the distributions by parity for ever-married women that the mean number of children desired increases at the higher parities. This probably reflects some combination of rationalization of unwanted births as wanted as well as the self-selection of women who want larger families into these higher parities.

In several of the countries, reproductive preferences have not yet crystallized in a numeric sense. A common response to the question on the desired number of children in such countries is: "It's up to God." This type of reaction was very common in Nigeria, where two-thirds of the women gave nonnumeric responses. Other countries that show high proportions of nonnumeric responses are Pakistan (61 percent) and Sudan (47 percent). This high figure in Pakistan may imply that the difference in the mean number desired between that country and Bangladesh is actually greater than is evident from the numerical calculation. These high proportions of nonnumeric responses are exceptions, however, and the large majority of countries show a rate of nonnumeric responses below 15 percent.

3.2 COVARIATES OF DESIRED NUMBER OF CHILDREN

Urban residence is universally associated with a smaller family norm. In some sub-Saharan African countries, the difference is considerable (Table 3.2). In Burkina Faso, Senegal and Madagascar, the mean number of children desired in urban areas is 4.3, compared with an average of 6.2 in rural areas. Large differences are common through

out the region. Although an urban-rural difference persists in the other regions, it is much smaller. Only in Bolivia is there no apparent difference between urban and rural areas.

The education of women is strongly associated with the number of children desired (Table 3.2). Without exception, women with no formal education want the most children, and women with more than a primary education want the fewest children. The reasons for this strong association still remain largely a matter of conjecture. There are probably many causal connections, including exposure to modern secular values that compete with traditional attitudes toward childbearing, the greater autonomy that more educated women have in marital relationships, and the greater likelihood of more educated women being in the labor force. There may also be some self-selection mechanisms involved, in the sense that some women with more education may have wanted fewer children even without that education. Some of the characteristics that lead some women to acquire more education may be the same ones that make women more receptive to family planning and the idea of smaller families. Whatever the exact connections, the strength and consistency of the association is impressive (Martin, 1995).

Another strong association with the number of children desired is evident with exposure to the mass media (Table 3.2). An index of such exposure has been constructed that summarizes whether a woman listens to the radio, watches television or reads newspapers or magazines with some frequency. This index ranges from zero, indicating no exposure to any of these media, to three, if she reports exposure to all three media. With only two exceptions (Jordan and Paraguay), women with a score of zero exposure want the most children on average. All that this index measures crudely is the occurrence of such exposure. There is no information about the content of the exposure; it could be music, advertisements, soap operas, films, news, government announcements or political speeches. Whatever the mixture, there seems to be an association between media exposure and reproductive attitudes. Perhaps this reflects a window on modern or western values related to consumer behavior or individualism, or on whatever constellation of values competes with traditional attitudes toward childbearing.

Because these three covariates—residence, education and media exposure—are themselves interrelated, a multivariate analysis is needed to assess the independence

Table 3.2 Number of children desired, by residence, education, and media exposure

Mean number of children desired by ever-married women, by residence, education, and exposure to mass media, Demographic and Health Surveys, 1990-94

Country	Residence		Education			Exposure to mass media				Number of women
	Urban	Rural	None	Primary	Secondary	None	Any one	Any two	All three	
Sub-Saharan Africa										
Burkina Faso	4.3	6.2	6.1	4.6	3.6	6.3	5.7	4.2	3.7	5,499
Cameroon	6.3	7.9	8.9	6.5	5.0	8.4	6.6	5.4	a	3,151
Ghana	3.7	4.8	5.5	4.3	3.8	5.1	4.4	3.9	3.4	3,672
Kenya	2.9	3.9	4.9	3.7	3.0	4.2	3.7	3.4	2.9	5,260
Madagascar	4.3	6.2	7.6	5.9	4.2	6.6	5.3	4.4	3.7	4,581
Malawi ^b	4.6	5.1	5.4	4.9	4.0	5.3	5.0	4.5	a	4,088
Namibia	4.3	6.6	6.8	6.2	4.2	6.9	6.5	5.8	3.5	2,636
Niger	7.0	8.7	8.6	7.1	5.0	8.8	8.4	7.1	5.3	5,821
Nigeria	5.3	6.6	7.0	6.1	4.8	6.8	6.4	5.3	a	7,268
Rwanda	3.7	4.4	4.6	4.2	3.7	U	U	U	U	4,450
Senegal	4.3	6.2	5.7	4.6	4.0	6.6	5.4	4.5	4.1	4,732
Sudan	5.3	6.3	6.8	5.5	4.6	6.8	5.5	a	a	5,860
Tanzania	5.7	6.6	7.4	5.8	4.4	6.9	6.2	5.2	4.7	6,977
Zambia	5.5	6.7	7.1	6.3	4.8	6.8	6.3	5.5	4.8	5,269
Zimbabwe	3.9	5.1	6.2	4.9	3.6	5.4	4.7	4.2	3.7	4,480
Near East/North Africa										
Egypt	2.6	3.1	3.1	2.8	2.5	3.2	3.0	2.9	2.5	9,864
Jordan	4.4	4.6	5.3	4.3	4.2	4.2	4.3	4.5	4.4	6,461
Morocco	3.3	4.3	4.1	3.1	2.7	4.4	4.1	3.7	2.8	5,639
Turkey	2.3	2.5	2.8	2.3	2.0	2.9	2.6	2.5	2.2	6,519
Asia										
Bangladesh	2.4	2.5	2.6	2.5	2.2	2.6	2.5	2.3	2.1	9,640
Indonesia	3.0	3.2	3.5	3.1	2.8	3.5	3.1	3.0	2.8	22,909
Pakistan	3.7	4.3	4.3	4.0	3.5	4.4	4.1	3.8	3.4	6,611
Philippines	3.3	3.6	5.0	3.7	3.2	4.2	3.7	3.5	3.3	9,511
Latin America/Caribbean										
Bolivia	2.7	2.7	2.8	2.7	2.6	2.8	2.6	2.6	2.7	5,981
Colombia	2.7	3.1	3.4	3.0	2.5	3.2	3.0	2.8	2.6	5,395
Dominican Republic	3.1	3.5	3.5	3.4	3.0	3.3	3.2	3.2	3.4	5,167
Paraguay	3.8	4.9	5.5	4.6	3.7	4.7	5.0	4.4	4.0	3,911
Peru	2.6	2.8	3.1	2.8	2.5	2.9	2.8	2.6	2.6	9,824

U = Unknown (not available)

^a All three media-exposure questions not included

^b Estimates for (rural-urban) residence were based on all women. These were taken from the country report (1992) because the variable is not available in the data set.

and relative strength of each variable.² It is of interest to determine whether media exposure in particular influences the number of children desired, independent of residence and education, because media exposure is the more practical policy instrument.

3.3 DESIRED NUMBER OF CHILDREN AMONG MEN

The analysis of reproductive preferences in this report is based exclusively on the responses of women. Another DHS comparative report (Ezeh, Seroussi, and

² Such an analysis is planned for a future DHS publication.

Raggers, 1995) focuses on the responses of men in similar surveys conducted in 15 countries. The reader is referred to that report for details, but it is relevant to note here that, contrary to expectation, the average number of children desired by married men³ is indistinguishable from the number desired by married women, except in the four countries of francophone Africa (Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Niger and Senegal), where it is considerably higher.

3.4 TRENDS IN THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN DESIRED

There have been appreciable reductions in the average number of children desired by women over the 10-15 years separating the WFS from the most recent DHS (Table 3.3 and Figure 3.1). The greatest decline recorded here is for Kenya, where the mean number of children desired dropped by 46 percent, from 7.2 in 1977-78 to 3.9 in 1993. At the opposite extreme, the number of children desired in Pakistan remained virtually unchanged over the same time period. Again the contrast with Bangladesh, which shows a 39-percent decline in the number desired, is revealing. The WFS was conducted in that country in 1975-76, before the extensive government family planning program got under way, at which time the number of children desired was the same as in Pakistan. This further suggests that the program in Bangladesh had an effect on reproductive preferences, rather than simply satisfying existing demand.⁴ The low level of the desired number in Bangladesh (2.5) places it on a par with Turkey and Peru.

³ These are national samples of married men in general. A few surveys included only the husbands of the women who were interviewed.

⁴ The trend in Pakistan is clouded by the very high proportion of women (61 percent) who gave a nonnumeric response (typically, "It's up to Allah") in the DHS to the question on the number of children desired. The fact that this reflects interviewer training differences is clear from the small proportion (3 percent) so classified in the Pakistan WFS. However, the lack of any downward trend in Pakistan is plausible, given the likelihood that women offering such responses are typically at the high end of the preference continuum.

Table 3.3 Trends in number of children desired

Trends in mean number of children desired among ever-married women from late 1970s to early 1990s, World Fertility Survey and Demographic and Health Surveys

Country	WFS	DHS-I	DHS-II or DHS-III	Percent decline from earliest to latest survey
Sub-Saharan Africa				
Cameroon	8.0	U	7.2	10
Ghana	6.0	5.5	4.7	22
Kenya	7.2	4.7	3.9	46
Nigeria	8.3	U	6.2	25
Rwanda	6.3	U	4.4	30
Senegal	8.8	7.1	6.2	30
Sudan	6.3	5.9	U	6
Zimbabwe	U	5.3	4.7	11
Near East/North Africa				
Egypt	4.1	2.9	2.9	29
Jordan	6.3	U	4.4	30
Morocco	4.9	3.7	3.8	22
Turkey	3.0	U	2.4	20
Asia				
Bangladesh	4.1	U	2.5	39
Indonesia	4.1	3.2	3.1	24
Pakistan	4.2	U	4.1	2
Philippines	4.4	U	3.5	20
Latin America/Caribbean				
Bolivia	U	2.8	2.7	4
Colombia	4.1	3.0	2.8	32
Dominican Republic	4.6	3.6	3.2	30
Paraguay	5.7	U	4.3	25
Peru	3.8	2.9	2.6	32

U = Unknown (no information)

Figure 3.1 Trends in the mean number of children desired, from late 1970s to early 1990s, World Fertility Survey and Demographic and Health Surveys

