



Bringing It All Back Home – Return Migration and Fertility Choices

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Summary. — Return migration exerts a wide-ranging influence upon the countries of origin of the migrants. We analyze whether returnees adjust their fertility choices to the norms that prevail in their previous countries of destination using Egyptian household-level data. Egyptian men migrate predominantly toward other Arab countries characterized by a higher number of children per woman. Relying on a two-step instrumental variable approach to control for the endogeneity of the migration decisions, we show that return migration has a positive and significant influence on marital childbearing.

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1. INTRODUCTION

“Millions of Egyptians flocked to work in the Gulf, and came back years later with money and Wahhabi ideas [...] In reality the Wahhabi ideology sees women as merely vessels for sex, a source of temptation, and a means to produce children.”

Alaa Al Aswany (2011), *On the State of Egypt*.

The relevance of international migration goes well beyond the sheer physical movement of people, as migration also represents a powerful mechanism to transmit ideas across borders. Spilimbergo (2009) shows that student migration toward democratic countries promotes democracy at home, while Batista and Vicente (2011) and Docquier, Lodigiani, Rapoport, and Schiff (2011) demonstrate that migration can improve the quality of domestic institutions, with the strength of such an effect being increasing with the level of education of the migrants and dependent on their sorting across destinations (Beine & Sekkat, 2013). Lodigiani and Salomone (2012) provide evidence that international migration increases female parliamentary representation at home when it is directed toward countries with a higher female political empowerment. Return migrants can bring back home a stronger entrepreneurial attitude (Piracha & Vadean, 2010; Wahba & Zenou, 2012), which helps their activities to survive over time (Marchetta, 2012).

International migration can also influence fertility decisions at origin as it changes the economic incentives that the parents face (Chen, 2006; Marchiori, Pieretti, & Zhou, 2010; Mountford & Rapoport, 2011) and as it exposes them to the fertility norms that prevail at destination (Fargues, 2007, 2011a; Beine, Docquier, & Schiff, 2013). Specifically, Fargues (2007, 2011a) suggested that fertility at origin can be endogenous to migration, as migrants enter in contact with the social determinants of fertility, such as female access to education and to the labor market, that prevail at destination

and they transfer the ensuing fertility norms back home. Beine *et al.* (2013) describe the various channels through which migration could influence fertility at origin and provide econometric evidence of the migration-induced transfer of fertility norms using aggregate data and tackling the endogeneity of the sorting of migrants across destinations, which influences the norms they are exposed to.¹ Their results imply that migration toward high-income OECD countries can contribute to narrow down the demographic imbalances between the countries of origin and destination,² while migration toward high-fertility countries, such as the Arab countries in the Gulf, can slow down the pace of demographic transition at origin.³

Migration toward the high-income Arab countries is almost exclusively male and predominantly temporary in nature,⁴ and hence one can reasonably expect that returnees would be the primary and direct channel of transmission of the fertility norms that prevail at destination. The objective of this

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paper is to understand whether the married couples where the husband is a returnee from a high-fertility destination country have a larger number of children than the couples of stayers. Specifically, we test whether a temporary migration experience in an Arab country exerts a significant influence on the fertility choices of Egyptian households. As recalled in the initial quote from [Al Aswany \(2011\)](#), Egypt has been experiencing massive waves of migration toward oil-producing Arab countries since the early 1970s, and we are going to use household-level data to explore the relationship between the past migration experience and fertility decisions.

We estimate a Poisson regression where the dependent variable is represented by the total number of live births recorded by a couple at the time of the 2006 Egyptian Labor Market Panel Survey (ELMPS), which represents our main source of data. A key analytical challenge is represented by the non-random selection of Egyptian migrants with respect to unobservable characteristics that can also have an impact on their fertility decisions. Egyptian male migrants to Arab countries might be open-minded individuals with loose family ties, or they might have conservative attitudes that resonate well with the social and cultural values that prevail at destination. We tackle the threat to identification posed by the endogeneity of the decision to migrate following [Wahba and Zenou \(2012\)](#) and [Marchetta \(2012\)](#) who rely on the fluctuations in the real price of oil to obtain an exogenous source of variation in the probability to migrate. The use of this instrument opens up the question of the age at which each male individual in our sample has to be matched to the corresponding real price of oil, and we rely on an explicit optimality criterion to chose among the alternative options. As our equation of interest is non-linear, we implement our instrumental variable strategy using the two-stage residual inclusion, 2SRI, estimator proposed by [Terza, Basu, and Rathouz \(2008\)](#).

This two-step approach allows us to remove the bias due to the non-random selection into migration, but it does not allow us to isolate the transfer of fertility norms that influence preferences toward the desired number of children. What we estimate is the aggregate effect of the migration experience, which might also capture an income effect upon the desired or actual family size that goes through the savings accumulated abroad and the impact of migration experience on earning opportunities in Egypt. While we do not have data on foreign savings, we can control for the economic conditions of the household through an index computed following [Filmer and Pritchett \(2001\)](#) that aggregates information on asset holdings measured after the end of the migration experience, and that thus reflects the accumulation of foreign savings. We can also observe that return migration could exert an influence that goes beyond its direct effect that we estimate: returnees could play a catalytic role,⁵ spreading changing attitudes toward fertility also to stayers. If return migration also has a diffuse influence upon other Egyptians, then the comparison of returnees with stayers in the econometric analysis would provide us with a lower bound of its actual direct impact upon returnee households.

The estimates reveal that Egyptian couples where the husband is a returnee from an Arab country have a significantly larger number of children. The result is actually stronger once we control for the endogeneity of the migration decision through the adoption of the 2SRI estimator. The real price of oil enters positively and significantly in the first stage equation, and the generalized residuals that we compute from this auxiliary regression have a negative and significant impact on the total number of children. This confirms that migration experience is endogenous, and it reveals that returnees have

on average unobservable characteristics that are associated with a lower level of fertility.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 discusses the arguments about the direct influence of migration upon the fertility choices of Egyptian returnees, and Section 3 presents the econometric approach that we use to identify the impact of return migration on fertility decisions. Section 4 describes the sources of the data, and it presents the relevant descriptive statistics. The estimates and the robustness checks are presented in Section 5, while Section 6 draws the main conclusions of the paper.

2. RETURN MIGRATION AND FERTILITY IN EGYPT

The direct influence of temporary migration experiences on the reproductive choices of the returnees depends on the relative timing of the decisions concerning migration and marriage,⁶ and it can be magnified when the former precedes the latter as this increases returnees' responsiveness to the norms that they observed while abroad. This appears to be the case for Egypt, a country that has experienced a substantial increase in the age at marriage ([Fargues, 2011b](#)), and where having migrated abroad significantly increases the hazard of getting married ([Assaad, Binzel, & Gadallah, 2010](#)).

Egyptians directed toward other Arab countries enter in contact with different norms concerning fertility, which can be at least partly related to significant differences in the religious attitudes toward childbearing that prevail in Muslim countries, as [McQuillan \(2004\)](#) observes that "what is striking in the case of Islam [...] is the variability in its message on key demographic questions" (p. 42). While the Islamic influence is usually related to the persistence of a high number of children per woman in Saudi Arabia ([McQuillan, 2004](#)), we can notice that the Grand Mufti of Egypt had released a *fatwā* that approved the use of birth control techniques already in 1937 ([Omrán, 1992](#)).⁷

The influence of religion on fertility choices goes beyond its specific teachings on childbearing and it actually goes through the prescriptions related to "the total content of [...] social organization" ([Goldscheider, 1971](#), p. 274), including gender roles. [Clingingsmith, Khwaja, and Kremer \(2009\)](#) provide experimental evidence of how "experiential knowledge of the diversity of Islamic practices and beliefs, [and] gender roles within Islam" (p. 1137) during the Hajj influences pilgrims' attitudes toward women. This suggests that temporary migration experiences in other Muslim countries can have an influence on the preferences of the returnees concerning their desired family size or the social determinants of fertility,⁸ such as female participation in the labor market.⁹ The econometric analysis of the impact of temporary male migration on the labor market participation of Egyptian women by [Binzel and Assaad \(2011\)](#) reveals a decline in wage work and an increase in subsistence work and employment in family-run activities, a pattern that might be detrimental for the status of the women within their households.

Even though only Egyptian men enter into direct contact with the fertility norms that prevail at destination and a change in their desired number of children might produce no influence on the preferences held by their wives ([Cochrane, Khan, & Osheba, 1990](#)),¹⁰ the total number of children would still respond to this change as far as fertility choices are the outcome of a bargaining between the two spouses ([Lehrer, 1996; Rasul, 2008](#)). The contact with norms that favor a higher number of children should then positively influence the total number of children of the couples where the man is a returnee.

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