

Having fewer children makes it possible to educate them all: an ethnographic study of fertility decline in north-western Tigray, Ethiopia

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Abstract: *Education is presumed to play a decisive role in decreasing fertility rates. This article is about the role of education and other factors in fertility decline in the context of current Ethiopian policies on population and sustainable development, based on an ethnographic study of women's agency and girls' pursuit of education in one semi-urban and one rural area in north-western Tigray, in northern Ethiopia. Long-term environmental insecurity and scarcity of arable land for the younger generation in this area serve as important background. Another central issue in the study was the religious conditioning of women's choices, which stood out most clearly in the case of contraceptive use. The research consisted of in-depth, semi-structured interviews in 2008 with 25 purposively selected women from three generations, based on their life histories, linked with participatory observation and extended informal dialogue with women at different points during 2008–12. A smaller household survey with 170 women and a task-based, education survey with 200 female and male students were also conducted in 2009. In those cases where women's contestations of the authority of the Orthodox Christian priests concurred with current Ethiopian policies on fertility decline, this was based on what women defined as their own authority in reproductive matters linked with flexible adaptation to their life-situations. © 2014 Reproductive Health Matters*

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In the colourful murals which decorate primary schools in the semi-urban and rural area of this study in north-western Tigray, Ethiopia, the slogan “education is the basis for development” is common. Together with the painted image of a girl and a boy in graduation attire (black robe and square hat), girls' and boys' equal roles in the development of the country are emphasised. Girls are, nevertheless, ascribed a greater burden than boys in the pursuit of development. For example, in line with global policy initiatives on population and sustainable development, and women and education,^{2–8} Ethiopia's National Action Plan for Gender Equality states:

“An educated woman is more likely to delay marriage, practice family planning resulting in a smaller family size, more available food for the family, and resources to educate the children. Investing in girls' education therefore has high

social and economic returns and is instrumental in achieving sustainable development and economic growth.”¹

This article explores fertility decline in a particular area of north-western Tigray, with long-term environmental insecurity, where scarcity of arable land for the younger generation has become a pressing issue. It also explores causality in relation to fertility decline from a different perspective from simply assuming “girls' education as contraception” as in the quote above. Total fertility is decreasing in Tigray, slightly more than the national average,⁹ despite a highly influential Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which congregates 96% of the population in the region.¹⁰ This is significant, since the imperative of giving birth to the children God gives has, until recently, constituted a decisive influence on people's reproductive behaviour. While the government's

provision of free family planning services reaches even non-literate women in the rural areas, one question asked was: whose authority weighed the most when women's religiosity is at stake in reproductive matters.

Empirical point of departure

The anthropological research on which this article is based took place in one semi-urban and one rural community in Asgede Tsimbla Wereda, a district in north-western Tigray. With yearly visits since 1993, my research there includes ethnographic fieldwork for one year in 2001–02 and four ethnographic field studies for a total of 15 months between 2008 and 2012. Focusing on education, this research was concerned with women's agency and gendered processes of change. Situated in a historical context where women had constituted 30% of the fighters in Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) during the armed struggle against the military regime *Derg* (1975–91),^{11,12} women's transgression of norms became a central research issue.

The most recent study 2008–12, included women from three generations, who have lived under three different regimes that conditioned their life-strategies, also in reproductive matters. In-depth semi-structured interviews based on their life histories, linked with participatory observation and informal dialogue drew, furthermore, on having followed women in this area in their daily lives over two decades. The purposive selection of 25 women for interviews in 2008 was based on an even age distribution between 18–75 that included literate and non-literate women from both female and male headed households in both the semi-urban and rural area of study. Seven had been either combat-fighters or cadres, civilian mobilisers (*shig weyenti*, literally "torches of the revolution"), or community leaders in Tigray People's Liberation Front during the struggle.

In this particular area of north-western Tigray, the research showed that the way women challenged and transgressed gender norms generally could also be traced in their reproductive behaviour. However, contrary to the explicit transgression of gender norms that took place when Tigrayan women took up arms, challenges to these norms more commonly took place in non-confrontational and flexible ways through negotiation – if not in silence. Women's strategy of keeping quiet about their own agency and

about what they did in practice to avoid social sanctions, also served the purpose of avoiding confrontation, whether with husbands or the church, on contraceptive use.

The exploratory household survey, in 2009, again with women from three generations in 170 households (109 semi-urban and 61 rural), was based on the same selection criteria mentioned above. It found that 55% of the semi-urban and 36% of the rural women had been through one or more divorces, in line with the agency manifest in the commonality of women-initiated divorces in highland Ethiopia, of which Tigray is a part.^{13–15} Based on the census data from 2007, 42.5% of the semi-urban and 14.7% of the rural households in the study area were female-headed, with the regional average being around 30%.^{10,16–18} The survey explored women's own perceptions of their position in the household: of those women who were currently living in a marriage/partnership, 87.3% in the semi-urban area and 98.1% in the rural area claimed they *shared* headship with their spouses/partners.

Based on the decisive role education is presumed to play in fertility decline, I included one question on contraceptive use in both the interviews and the exploratory household survey. Other questions covered livelihood issues, age at first marriage (their own and their daughters' in relation to underage marriage), number of marriages, number of children, and their own and their children's education. It was therefore possible to compare the women's perceptions of family planning, whether they considered using contraception, and whether they (still) believed it was a sin, with their level of education.

The exploratory, task-based education survey involved 113 girls and 87 boys aged 14–20 in grades 8 through 11 in five classes randomly selected by the directors in one rural and two semi-urban schools. The proportion of girls to boys reflected the fact that Tigrayan girls have outnumbered boys in secondary-level education in this region for a number of years.¹⁹ The survey sought information on students' marital status (due to the prevalence of underage marriage), educational trajectory, number of siblings, and parents' and siblings' level of education. The students were also asked their views on the importance of education and to write a short essay on their wishes for the future. This latter task was intended to probe how education impacted on their perceptions of the possibilities education

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