

Low fertility in Post-COVID-19 in Sri Lanka: Determinants and Consequences

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Introduction

Low fertility has become a common phenomenon in many developed countries, and today, it is also visible in some developing countries. Sri Lanka is one of the countries in South Asia which experienced a rapid demographic transition, and fertility dropped from 5.3 children per woman in 1953 to 1.98 children per woman in 2000 (De Silva, 2015; Perera; 2017). However, in the last two decades, Sri Lanka's fertility has remained slightly higher than the sustainable fertility level, ranging from 2.2 to 2.4 children per woman (De Silva, 2015; Perera, 2018). Demographers have also been debating whether this tempo shift is due to post-war and post-tsunami effects or due to changes in fertility intention among younger and older cohorts (De Silva, 2015; Perera, 2018). The phenomena of fertility decline have been evident across many countries during the COVID-19, and human fertility is severely affected by the COVID-19 period (Wang, 2023). Sri Lanka's post-COVID-19 fertility decline has also become a significant demographic issue as fertility declines by seventy thousand births during 2019 to 2023. The country is currently facing substantial challenges with its aging population (Perera, 2024), emigration of youth and adults of the working age population due to the current economic crisis, and shrinking of the labor force population. The issue of fertility decline not only affects the demographic structure of the country but also creates socio-economic issues with far-reaching implications in the long run as it is directly linked with future fertility trends, demand for human resources, potentially impacting economic growth and productivity and the socio-economic planning of the country. Understanding the fertility decline and associated factors is crucial for developing effective policies and interventions to maintain sustainable fertility in Sri Lanka.

Objectives

The objectives of this paper are twofold: a) to compare fertility between pre and post-COVID-19 periods by district and (b) to identify factors of recent fertility decline by exploring married couples' fertility preferences and intentions. The specific objectives of the research are: (i) to understand the perceptions and attitudes of unmarried youth (age 20–29) towards marriage and fertility in Sri Lanka; (ii) To analyze the short-term, medium-term, and long-term socio-economic consequences of fertility decline in Sri Lanka and its impact on future demographic dynamics.

A brief review of literature

Considering the historical analysis of the decline in fertility rates in the western world and countries in Asia, it traces the transition from high fertility in agricultural societies, where large families were economically beneficial, to lower fertility in industrialized societies driven by economic development, urbanization, and improved access to education and healthcare (Bacci, 2013). The role of the demographic transition theory in explaining this shift emphasizes the impact of the contraceptive revolution, which gave couples greater control over childbearing (Zaidi & Morgan, 2017). Moreover, cultural changes, particularly in gender roles and family norms, have further contributed to declining fertility and the future implications of sustained low fertility, such as population aging and economic challenges may emerge subsequently (Anderson & Kohler, 2015; Colleran, 2016).

Results of the studies of Sri Lankan fertility dynamics based on Demographic and Health Survey data highlight factors such as women's low level of education, residential sector (urban, rural and estate), poor economic status, and being a Moor determine the likelihood of a desire for more than two children. In addition, the influence of socio-economic changes, cultural norms, and government policies on these trends, as well as the emerging preferences for smaller family sizes are examined. Furthermore, in terms of ethnic groups, Moor and Tamil women were more likely to prefer more children than Sinhalese women. Considering the economic status of women, the study further revealed that the poorer women were more likely to desire a higher number of children compared to rich women, while women in the middle wealth quintile were more likely to desire more children. The findings of studies evident that the importance of continued investment in education, healthcare, and family planning services to sustain favorable fertility outcomes and

manage future population growth (Bongaarts, 2015; Dilrukshi and Perera, 2022; Perera, 2017). However, the prevalence of these trends needs to be examined in the context of post COVID 19 in Sri Lanka.

Data and Methods

A mixed-method research design is employed with the use of both primary and secondary data. The registered births and deaths information were obtained from Registrar's General department are used to identify the magnitude of fertility decline between two periods by districts. In addition, qualitative data pertaining to 30 in-depth interviews is obtained from couples who got married between 2019 and 2023 but had one or no children are used to understand the changes in fertility decisions, perceptions and intentions.

Results

The analysis was done both macro and micro level. The analysis on decline of births by districts revealed that Sri Lanka's post-COVID-19 fertility decline is significant in 21 districts while four districts in the northern province (Killinochchi, Mannar, Vavuniya and Mullaitivu) report a slight increase in births. Qualitative data gathered were analysed using a few themes and the analysis revealed that factors such as couples' economic security and cost of child-rearing, migration intentions, and the voluntary decision that they never want to have children affecting their decision to delay childbearing, limiting and no children which are crucial in addressing determinants and consequences of low fertility in post-COVID -19 Sri Lanka. This is an ongoing study, and a comprehensive analysis of qualitative data with multiple voices of study participants on why they prefer fewer children will be presented in the full paper by comparing pre and post-COVID- and 19 periods.

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