

Comment on the paper *Changes in the Demand for Children between 2003 and 2014 in Nigeria* by Stella Babalola, Joshua O. Akinyemi, and Clifford O. Odimegwu

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Fertility has been a topical issue in sub-Saharan Africa because of the region's singular record of being behind almost every geographic region in the demographic transition with regard to fertility decline (Caldwell and Caldwell, 1987; Frank, 1983). There is a growing body of evidence, especially, from the developed world, that reduced fertility rates foster economic development and social well-being of the citizenry. Specifically, the reduction of fertility is beneficial in many domains, as it opens up completely new employment and educational prospects for young women. Moreover, reduced fertility creates new manpower for the job market which helps to boost economic growth.

It is within this context of the demographic transition that the present paper makes an important contribution to demographic theory. In this paper, the authors outline the changes in demand for children by married women in Nigeria over a 10 year period using a nationally representative survey data.

The fundamental finding of the present study is that broadly the evidence of a fertility decline in Nigeria, a pro-natalist and high fertility society has been visible in recent decades. Specifically, the study found that this fertility transition in Nigeria is a function of the drop in the desire for additional children and the increase in indecision about fertility intentions by married women in that country.

This fertility transition is taking place within the context of such coordinates of modernisation as formal education, urban living, participation in wage labour, exposure to modern methods of contraception and monogamous marriages. Thus, the fertility transition

is taking place within the context of the social and economic transformation that has been sweeping the African continent ever since the inception of the colonial project.

The study underscores several crucial issues in regard to the social structural conditions in sub-Saharan African societies. First, demographically speaking, most sub-Saharan African societies are defined by the so-called youth bulge, a situation whereby because of the past regime of high fertility and low mortality there is a predominance of children and youth vis a vis other age groups in their populations.

Thus, this fertility decline means that over time the proportions of children and youth in the total population will decrease relative to the proportions of the elderly in these populations, although a fall in fertility does not lead immediately to demographic aging; in fact, as Oizumi (2011) has observed, the aging ratio does not start to increase until about 30-40 years after a shift to a declining fertility rate regime. Moreover, there is a growing body of evidence, especially, from the developed world that in the short run reduced fertility rates is beneficial in many domains, as it opens up completely for new employment and educational prospects for young women, while it also creates new manpower for the job market which helps to boost economic growth.

Several demographic dynamics contribute to the boost in the economic growth in the wake of fertility decline. For one thing, the decline in the proportion of children in the population, should, all things being equal, relieve the state of the burdens of child care

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and education. Secondly, the increasing educational attainment and its corollary of increasing participation in the labour force and increased adoption of modern effective contraception by women in the country will further spur current anti-natal attitudes we are witnessing in the country.

However, in the long run, continuous decline of the fertility rate, especially, below the replacement level as is the case in most of the developed world, is not a good demographic scenario as it will cause the negative growth rate of the population and increase the dependency ratio, especially the old-age dependency ratio.

The reason for this scenario is that decreasing proportions of children and youth will mean fewer workers, a situation which is likely to put an upward pressure on the dependency ratio. In other words, in the words of Komine (2007), in contrast to the demographic dividend, with the rise in the demographic aging ratio, the society experiences the “demographic onus”.

Thus, while population ageing is not necessarily negative because of its effect on spurring increased community participation in the short run, lower crime rate and supporting and maintaining informal social networks in communities and families, it simultaneously leads to a decreased labour force participation rates which increases the dependency ratio (ratio of older people to younger people in the workforce).

A related issue, as a result of this demographic change, is the quality of care of the elderly in these countries as a result of the stagnation in the growth of the economies of most sub-Saharan countries. It is also significant to note that historically and culturally, the institution of the family in sub-Saharan Africa has been defined by a regime of universal marriage and the presence of a large number of children as a result of marriage. To the extent that this is true, fertility decline of the type uncovered by the present study will affect not only the structure of the family, but also the quality of such functions of the “conventional” African family as care of the elderly.

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Professor Amoateng trained as a Sociologist of the family and since obtaining his PhD has focused on the patterns of family formation and dissolution in African populations. He has also focused on and written widely in the area of Adolescent and Youth development in sub-Saharan Africa.