Poverty and population growth: lessons from our own past

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Let's try to understand why, by looking at our own demographic history. As recently as two or three generations ago, mortality rates in the United States were as high as they are now in most third world countries. Opportunities for our grandmothers to work outside the home were limited. And ours was largely an agrarian society in which every family member was needed to work on the farm. Coauthor Frances Lappé's own grandmother, for example, gave birth to nine children, raised them alone on a small farm, and saw only six survive to adulthood. Her story would not be unusual in a still fast-growing third world country today.

Faced with scarcity, poor families needed many children to help with work on the farm, and because of high infant-mortality rates, they needed many more pregnancies and births to achieve the necessary family size.

In the United States, the move to two-children families took place only after a society-wide transition that lowered infant death rates, opened opportunities to women outside the home, and transformed ours into an industrial rather than agrarian economy, so that families no longer relied on their children's labor. If we contrast Lappé's grandmother's story to a latter-day urban middle-class family, we can see that children who were once a source of needed labor are now a

source of major costs, including tuition, an extra room in the house, the latest model basketball shoes, and forgone earnings for every year that a professional mom stays home with the kids.

The United States advanced through the falling-birth-rate phase of the demographic transition in response to these *societal* changes, well before the advent of sophisticated contraceptive technologies, even while the government remained actively hostile to birth control. (As late as 1965, selling contraceptives was still illegal in some states.)[22]

Using our own country's experience to understand rapid population growth in the third world, where poverty is more extreme and widespread, we can now extend our hypothesis concerning the link between hunger and high fertility rates: both persist where societies deny security and opportunity to the majority of their citizens-where infant-mortality rates are high and adequate land, jobs, education, health care, and old-age security are beyond the reach of most people, and where there are few opportunities for women to work outside the home.

Without resources to secure their future, people can rely only on their own families. Thus, when poor parents have lots of children, they are making a rational calculus for survival. High birth rates reflect people's defensive reaction against enforced poverty. For those living at the margin of survival, children provide labor to augment meager family income. In Bangladesh, one study showed that even by the age of six a boy provides labor and/or income for the family. By the age of twelve, at the latest, he contributes more than he consumes.[23]

Population investigators tell us that the benefit children provide to their parents in most third world countries cannot be measured just by hours of labor or extra income. The intangibles are just as important. Bigger families carry more weight in community affairs. With no reliable channels for advancement in sight, parents may hope that the next child will be the one clever or lucky enough to get an education and land a city job despite the odds. In many countries, income from one such job in the city can support a whole family in the countryside.

And impoverished parents know that without children to care for them in old age, they will have nothing.[24] They also realize that none of these possible benefits will be theirs unless they have many children, since hunger and lack of health care will kill many of their offspring before they reach adulthood. The World Health Organization has shown that both the actual death and the fear of death of a child will increase the fertility of a couple, regardless of income or family size.[25]

Finally, high birth rates may reflect not only the survival calculus of the poor, but the disproportionate powerlessness of women as well. Many women have little opportunity for pursuits outside the home, because of power relations internal to the family and/or in the larger society. Continued motherhood may then become their only "choice."

Perhaps the best proof that the powerlessness of women can undergird high fertility comes from extensive research on the effect of women's education. In one study after another, women's education turns out to be a powerful predictor of lower fertility. As women's schooling increases, fertility typically falls.[26]

Of course, we should guard against interpreting these findings literally-that what women learn is how to limit births. In fact, study after study has shown that people tend to have the number of children they want, regardless of whether more modern birth control methods are available or the government has a family planning program.[27] Rather, the fact that women are getting educated reflects a multitude of changes in society that empower women and provide them with opportunities in the workplace.[28]

Just as the powerlessness of women subordinated within the family and society may partially explain high birth rates, we must recognize that the men who hold power over women may themselves be part of subordinated groups in society. As long as poor men are denied sources of self-esteem and income through productive work, it is likely they will cling even more tenaciously to their superior status vis-à-vis women, and to a desire or need for more children.[29]