

Male Preference and Marital Stability in Cross River State, South South Nigeria

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Abstract: *The issue of marital instability and its causes has received much attention of recent from experts in diverse fields of study. One of such causes that have been identified and taken up for study is male preference. This study takes a look the effects of male preference on marital stability in Cross River State. Respondents for the study were systematically selected from the population of study (ever married persons). Data for the study was gathered using qualitative techniques of data collection. Focus group discussions and in depth interviews were held with participants and key informants who were selected purposively for their experience in marriage and the issue under discourse. One important feature of the people studied is their lineage system. They are patrilineal in nature and prefer large families mostly for economic purposes as well as the continuity of the lineage. The study found that because it is a patriachal society, there was a strong preference for male children. It was also found that preference for male children was mostly expressed by the female participants, with the major reason being the stability of their marriage. Thus it was observed that, where there was a preference to fulfill the needs of the couple, the marriage was more likely to be unstable, especially in the later stages of the marriage. It was also observed that cultural norms and values prevalent in the state contributed immensely in enhancing and sustaining male preference. The paper therefore concludes that improvement in the status of women is very crucial in the task of reducing male preference. There is also the need for development, especially of the rural areas as one of the remedies for curbing those aspects of the culture that support male child preference, and its consequent implications on marital stability.*

Key Words: *Male Preference, Marital Stability, Population, Patriarchy, Socio-cultural Factors*

I. Introduction

Male preference has been well documented in a large number of countries, though the degree of such preference varies from one country to another, depending on such factors as the level of economic development, social norms, cultural and religious practices, marriage and family systems, degree of urbanization and the nature of social security system (Das Gupta, 1997; Caldwell and Caldwell, 1997; Bairagi, 2001; Isiugo-Abanihe, 2003; Ottong, 1997; Akpan, 2008). The preference for sons tends to be particularly pronounced in developing countries, in rural areas and among more traditional couples and couples of lower socio- economic status. Although male child preference is still common even in many economically developed countries (Bennett, 1983), the preference often exists side by side with parents desire to have at least one child of either sex.

This desire is often backed by the continued support given by socio-cultural factors such as patriarchy, support for parents at old age, title inheritance, and morbidity issues, these are some of the issues that have been identified as contributing directly to male child preference in developing countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Caldwell, 1997). Continued insistence on achieving desired fertility by couples has brought serious strain on families and marriages thereby leading to breakdown in family ties, separation and subsequently divorce. The rising rate of marital instability in Cross River State is caused by so many socio- cultural and economic factors but most importantly male preference (Akpan, 1998).

A variety of historical, moral, ethical and economic factors underlie male preference. In Nigeria as in other parts of Africa, the family is dominated by a male patriarch and the practice of ancestor worship is common place, (Ottong, 1987). The patriarchal family structure and the resultant preference for sons became institutionalized values and therefore formed part of the way of life of the people. Thus according to the book of rites "a woman is to obey her father before marriage, her husband during married life and her son in widowhood" (Tischler, 2002). These traditions also stress the importance of carrying on the family line through male progeny, thus providing the justification for the tradition of female infanticide in some countries like China.

Male preference has been taken up here for study to ascertain the extent to which it accounts for marital stability. Male preference may not necessarily be assumed to be the sole determinant of marital stability in Cross River State, but it may be a major contributory factor and tends to provide part of the answer in the search for the cause of marital instability in Cross River State.

The Research Problem

The causes of marital instability in most developing countries have been identified as the persistence of socio-cultural factors and norms which favor male preference. Male preference here means the preference for a male child over the female child. In most households, the husband dominates and directs the affairs while the wife or wives and children just follow. In the customs and traditions of many African societies, women like children are to be seen not heard; this illustrates the status of the female in the traditional setting. In Nigeria, tradition accords a low status to the female and prime status to the male. The man is recognized as the one who marries the woman and in most cases the decision to have or not to have children is that of the man (Ottong, 1987). In the traditional setting his decision most of the time favors more children, especially sons, as more and more children, further enhances his status as a man in the society.

The essential nature of sons as traditionally conceived prompted the investigation into the relationship between male preference as it affects marital stability. Most people find it very difficult to stop having children when they do not have at least a son, even with many daughters. Most marriages get dissolved for the sake of the absence of a male child. In many instances most men go for a second or more wives just for the simple reason of getting a male child. This search for a male child seems to be a major source of marital instability in Cross River State, with its attendant problems of stigmatization of women and subsequent breakdown of marital values.

According to Ottong, (1987) the major roles of a woman are child bearing, child rearing and ultimately the care of the home. Therefore the inability of any woman to fulfill this all important role is viewed with contempt and great disapproval and thus can lead to some major consequences such as separation and divorce. In most countries where son preference is strong, it is closely linked to the low status accorded women in the society. Since creation, most traditional societies of Africa have strictly remained patriarchal. It is believed that the family line could only be carried on solely by descendants on the male side. Only the male offspring belonged to the clan community. The traditional customs of marriage and the family constituted the foundations of male supremacy. The improvements in marriage and divorce laws of some countries as well as improvement in education, occupation and job opportunities for women have not helped much in improving the status of women in the society.

According to some scholars, (Bairagi, 2003; Lundberg, 2005; Isiugo-Abanihe, 2003) sons were traditionally considered advantageous for two economic reasons: support for their parents in old age and the provision of labor for the farm or family business. Research questions emanating from the foregoing, therefore, are; why do people prefer male to female children? Does this preference have any implication for marriage and family stability? Can it lead to possible dissolution of the marriage? What are the possible socio-cultural factors that enhance or sustain this preference? These questions and other issues raised in this section formed the main task of this study.

Objectives of the Study: the study aims at examining the extent to which male preference affects marriage and family stability, with a view to isolating factors which will be of importance to planners and policy makers in addressing the problems of marital instability in Cross River State. Secondly, the study seeks to identify the place of socio-cultural factors prevalent in the state in determining male preference.

Male Preference and Marital Stability

The reasons why people want children vary from society to society. They could be economic, social, political, traditional as well as religious. These reasons help to guide couples to decide on the sex and number of children they desire. In most traditional societies, manhood is defined in terms of the number of male children a man is able to have. Cox (1999) observed that the actual family sizes of couples are sometimes not really their desired family size. He however indentified psychological, economic and moral factors as strong in determining family size. Other factors he noted include variations in the average age at marriage, changes in marriage rate such as those resulting from alteration in the balance of the sexes, trends in divorce, medical advances and many other factors. For him wealth, longevity and many children (sons in particular) have been regarded as the three major sources of happiness.

As a major life event marriage is accompanied by a variety of new expectations and changes in self definitions. It is reasonable to assume that such processes should involve fertility intentions. Marriage thus can be viewed as a rite of passage or as a major role transition capable of causing fertility intentions to become more fixed. With the occurrence of marriage, a number of changes with potential consequences for fertility intentions may take place. Marriage provides a real spouse to fill the role of the individual who hitherto had been anticipated as a mother or father of one's children. In fact, prospective grand parents may begin to make explicit their expectations regarding grand children. Marriage provides a measure of reality in assessing the cost and benefits of children relative to the couple's present lifestyle as well as their short and long term goals. Marriage provides a partner who is taken into account when one declares fertility intentions. Indeed, among some groups,

marriage does not mark the final transition to adulthood; rather, childbearing and childrearing makes one fully adult.

Available literature, shows that the birth of a son relative to a daughter increases both the quality and stability of the parents' relationship (Lundberg, 2005;Graham,1998). Child gender effects on marriage and divorce imply that girls are less likely to live with their fathers, this gap in father contact is exacerbated by substantial differences in post-divorce custody arrangements for boys and girls. Male children increase parents' subjective reports of individual wellbeing and marital satisfaction. Several studies (Barnett and Baruch, 2006, Katzev et al 1996) have found that both partners in marriage with sons report higher levels of marital satisfaction than do husbands and wives in marriages who have only daughters. Boys also reduce their mothers' perceptions of the likelihood of divorce (Heaton and Albrecht, 1995; Katzev et al, 1996). A recent study of subjective reports of well being among a sample of Danish twins, by Kohler et al, (2004) found that the birth of a first child increases reported happiness, and that men enjoy an almost 75 percent larger happiness gain from a first born son than from a first born daughter.

In the 1980s, several studies by sociologist, reported that, in the United States, having a son relative to a daughter increases the likelihood that a marriage will remain intact. Spanier and Glick (2001) found that divorce is more likely if all children are girls, especially if the mother has relatively little education. Morgan, et al (2005) found that sons reduce the risk of marital disruption by a percent more than do daughters and Mott (1995) stated that girls are less likely than boys to live in a household with a father present.

There are however, several studies that have found no significant child gender effect on divorce, (Devine and Forehand, 2006; Bracher et al; 1993; Diekmann and Schmidheiny, 2004). Morgan and Pollard (2003) replicated the results of Morgan et al (2003) to confirm a negative effect of sons on divorce rates for the 1960-1979 period, but report that this effect is attenuated sharply in later periods. The absence of significant child gender effects on divorce rates in these latest studies appears to be due both to a real decrease in the differential impact of sons on marital stability and to the use of data sources with relatively small sample sizes. However census based analysis show significant child gender effects on divorce that increase with family size and decline over time. Berdard and Deschene (2005) and Ananat and Michaels (2004) found significant effects of sons on divorce probabilities using the 1980 U.S. Census. The two studies found comparable positive effects of a first born daughter on the probability that her mothers first marriage may end in divorce. Thus if a son increases the stability of marital unions, it seems likely that the birth of a boy will improve the quality of non marital unions as well. Lundberg and Rose (2003) estimate the effect of child gender on the probability of marriage for women in the panel study of income dynamics who had non marital births. Mothers of sons were more likely to marry, and marry more quickly than mothers of daughters.

The question is why might marriages with sons be more stable than marriages with daughters? Sociological studies of child gender effects on marriage and divorce emphasize the social norms that dictate a more active role for fathers in the parenting of sons than daughters, and postulate a positive causal relationship between paternal involvement and marital stability (Lundberg, 2005; Graham,1998). In economic terms Lundberg (2005) states, that fathers involvement in parenting can be related to marital stability in two distinct ways.

First, if fathers are more involved in parenting sons than daughters, perhaps because they play a special role in the emotional and social development of boys, then having a son increases marital surplus, or the value of marriage relative to single parenthood. Secondly, fathers may simply place a higher value on marriage and family if they have a son. This preference may be due to gender bias on the part of fathers or to the bonding that occurs when fathers spend more time with the child and are more involved with family activities. In either case, the greater family involvement of fathers of boys appears to be associated with increased marital satisfaction for mothers and fathers of boys and a reduced propensity to divorce.

Thus if the birth of a son increases the value of marriage more than the birth of a daughter and consequently leads to a more stable union then we might expect that fertility will be higher for those marriages than for the unstable ones. In a 1962 study of the Bekwari of the Cameroon, Ardener found a positive correlation between marital stability and higher fertility. This should however be expected because in the rural setting, children born outside marriage are not regarded much in their society and in Cross River State marriage is much as important as having a male child. Young girls look forward to the day they would be married while most widows always want to remarry. Studies have confirmed that a woman who has never been divorced would have more children than a woman who has been divorced, given that they are fertile and do not use any birth control devices. This is because divorce brings about a break in the marital life of the union and thus leads to a reduction in the number of children the couple will ultimately have even if they were to re-unite.

In most rural areas women are seen as property purchased by men. They are expected to obey their husbands, get pregnant when they want them to, and in most occasions any disobedience may earn them a divorce .The more a woman sees herself as tied to the apron of the husband, the more stable her marriage is. This cultural construct attributed to women and the roles they play seem to be the major reason why men and

indeed couples desire sons than daughters. The traditional African society is rooted in patriarchy where women cannot hold traditional titles and headship; couples tend to desire more male children who will take over from them when they are no more and from where descent and ancestry will be perpetuated.

There is a convergence of interests at several levels to put a premium on sons and discriminate against daughters. Son preference is in the interest of the lineage, whose continuity depends on sons alone. It is also in the interest of the household, for whom daughters are transitory members. For every individual, brothers and sons are more valuable than sisters and daughters. This does not mean that sisters and daughters may not be loved as much as brothers and sons. However, a girl values her brother more than her sister because the former will do much for her throughout life, while the later will effectively disappear after marriage. Similarly, a woman values her sons more than her daughters because the former will be her major source of support. Indeed, a woman's position in her husband's home is not consolidated unless she produces at least one son, (DasGupta, 1997).

Economic factors go a long way toward explaining son preference in Asia, but not necessarily in the way put forward by Bardhan and Miller, (2008). These authors relate the care allocated to people to their value to the economy. People's positions in society, however, are determined not only by the contributions they make to the economic process, but also by their rights of ownership and decision-making. According to them, the structure of rights over asset ownership and decision-making favors males very heavily and has an overwhelming influence on the position of the sexes. These social-structural factors generate son preference by making people depend heavily on sons or other male kins for necessary economic support.

There are still substantial gaps between males and females. According to Mason, (2004), in China, political efforts to help women hold up the sky have blunted some of the effects of Confucian tradition, but aspects of that tradition are still being reproduced by millions of parents. Sons are favoured over daughters in the allocation of house hold tasks; duration of academic career, access to private tutors; demands for remittances; and distribution of family property.

In view of the lower educational attainment of women, it is not surprising that women are underrepresented in many relatively desirable jobs. The available data do not permit an assessment of the degree to which this underrepresentation is, based on the lack of educational qualifications alone and how much is attributable to other factors. It is clear, however, that job opportunities are more limited for women than for men. Men substantially outnumbered women in leadership positions. According to the 2006 population census, 75 percent of heads of government agencies and 98 percent of heads of party and people's organizations are males, as well as 99 percent of leaders of rural communities (Taylor, 2007).

The dominance of men in leadership positions is even more pronounced in rural areas, where 98 percent of agricultural production leaders are males. In summary, the position of women has improved significantly over time, but there is still a long way to go. As long as differentials exist in educational and employment opportunities, the preference of couples for sons over daughters is likely to continue.

Theoretical Framework

Talcott Parsons voluntary social action theory has been adopted here in an attempt to explain the factors determining male preference in relation to marital stability as well as accounting for differentials that exist amongst individuals and societies.

According to Talcott Parsons voluntary social action theory, the society influences the ends which the actor seeks and the means towards attaining them. Therefore the society plays an important role in affecting an individual's goals and the means of achieving them. Essentially, the cultural environment predetermines the ends which an individual pursues by providing the cultural structure upon which an individual/couple can express their desire. Thus, one can say that the cultural environment in the state exerts very strong influence on a couple's sex preferences as well as their fertility behaviors. Through the transmission of concepts about acceptable norms, values and sex role behavior for men and women, desire for male children tends to increase. Similarly, cultural attitudes towards male preference may also have direct impact on the stability of marital unions. Thus the insistence of some couples on having at least a male child to carry on the family name. It is observed that the perception, attitudes and actions of individuals in relation to male preference are largely determined within the context of the socio-cultural norms and values of the society. The society provides the platform within which attitudes and behavior towards preferences are shaped. Wallace (1988), summarizes this carefully, when he noted that the available opportunities, the role models, the reinforcement, contingencies that further shape behaviors, the social norms, the perceptions, the beliefs, attitude and values of an individual are mostly influenced by his social environment, which affects his behavior.

The fact remains that children are wanted for what Roam and Railey (1990) calls dynastic imperative. This is the desire to pass on the family name and to be remembered. It is true that one will be remembered by friends and colleagues but the surest and most obvious way of proving ones existence for posterity is to produce children particularly sons who will carry on the family name. Moreover the society expects children to be a sort

of economic assert to aged parents, and an avenue through which the family's wealth can be transferred and sustained, thus children especially sons are desired in the family as a sort of economic security and a form of insurance against the unexpected.

II. Methodology

The study was carried out in Cross River state, South-South Nigeria. The population of study was ever married persons (males and females) that is, whether currently married, widowed, separated, or divorced. The sample for the research was drawn from the 18 local government areas of Cross River State. Group discussions and in depth interviews were held in all the sampled areas with persons who fall within the prescribed sample (ever married persons). Respondents were selected purposively because of their experience in marriage, their fertility preferences and the issue under discourse.

Analysis of data was done using thematic narratives of participants and key informants' views and opinions as expressed during the discussions and interview sessions, after a thorough translation and transcription of all the information gathered from the focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews (IDI).

III. Results And Discussion

Questions relating to sex preference and marital stability were asked in order to elicit information on issues relating to how the respondents perceived marriage and the idea of taking a second wife or more in trying to get a male child or the sex of child preferred. Except for a small proportion of the population of the discussants/participants, almost all the male discussants expressed their desire to take a second or more wives in order to achieve their desired fertility.

It is important to state here that in spite of the respondent's level of education or their general socio-economic standing, they still expressed a preference for male children. It was however observed in some of the focus group discussions with younger men from the southern part of the state that some discussants were not really bothered whether they have all males or all females. However a situation arose during a session with some middle aged men from the northern part of the state, where an argument almost ensued, a not so educated participant busted out saying:

I don't care whether my wife has hundred girls if she does not give me a boy, I will marry another wife, abi no bi Africa we dey?(pidgin) Who will answer your name, all these girls in the house within a short time they will all get married and begin to answer another person's name and your own name will be lost. When they (girls) marry and go who will take care of your property and even you because some of them their husbands will not allow them to do anything for their family again, so why won't I marry another wife? Why won't I look for a male child?

A similar question was directed at the female discussants only, in order to assess their perception of the impact of sex preference on marital stability. Majority of the female respondents agreed that their husbands will marry a second wife if they do not give birth to a male child. This situation is to be expected especially in a patrilineal society like Cross River State in which the perpetuation of family line is strongly emphasized and having biological children is seen as a factor in this achievement. Indeed this pronatalist view of the people leaves women who are unable to give birth to children of preferred sex exposed to the risk of marital instability/insecurity, as summed up by two discussants during a session of the focus group discussions with a group of older women who have completed child bearing:

In this part of the world marriage is just for you to give birth to children and failure to do that can lead to your losing your marriage, especially if you do not have the sex of children your husband wants. I have seen a woman who was thrown out by her husband because she did not have a son and according to her husband's people, their brother is an only son, he must have a son who will carry on the family name and take care of his property.

Another female participant also reiterated:

I was thrown out of my own home because I could not give my husband a son even though it was not my fault, but nobody, not even my husband would listen or even understand, he kept blaming me for not bearing a son and anytime I said, did or asked for anything, he will just tell me, give me a son and I will do anything for you. He was so obsessed with this situation that he just started misbehaving until I was thrown out. However, a middle age female key informant, who had all female children but had no problems in her marriage, expressed her feelings thus:

I don't see anything wrong in having all female children after all; it is the man who determines the sex of the child. So I don't think that my husband will now say I should park out or he is going to marry another wife when he knows that he has not given me a male child to bear for him

Other interview sessions also revealed a similar pattern of sex preference among the key informants. The female discussants/participants were more likely than their male counterparts to express a lack of preference except for the issue of the security of their marriage. Some discussants/participant noted that male children were more productive, helpful, supportive and caring than the female children, while others disagreed and cited examples from their locality to buttress their claims as quoted from one middle aged female interviewee. For us in my family the sex of the children does not matter at all, my husband loves our three daughters very much. In fact he dotes on them and cannot do without them. We believe in my family that whether male or female anybody can become anything in life with proper upbringing and adequate training. So for us we are putting in all our best to make sure that our children become their best in life. As much as I know my husband has not showed me any sign of displeasure.

Much of the problems associated with marital instability were highlighted during the focus group discussion and indepth interviews with a clear division between those who think that marriages should break as a result of no male children and those who think otherwise, but the most striking came from a middle age male participant from the Southern part of the state who said:

Why should I divorce my wife or even think of marrying another one, in fact I won't mind if I have all female children in my house, they are a blessing. If you have daughters you don't suffer at old age, they (girls) are always there for you, while the males will get married and forget their families, all their attention will be shifted to their wives and children. In fact in my family the women do better than the men and they are the ones holding and keeping the family together.

In spite of this feeling, the need for a balance between sons and daughters was emphasized and the desire of having at least a son was stressed in all the groups. There was a greater agreement that both males and female children are important in their own right given the different roles they perform and the fact that children are a gift from God. There was also a general consensus that with proper socialization and training both sexes could be useful to parents and family. Obviously therefore, it could be said that there exists a strong preference for males than female children among the discussants/participants who expressed a preference.

Findings from the study also reveal that more females desire more male children than their male counterpart. This desire it was found, is closely linked to the stability and security of their marriage, much more than the prevailing traditional or cultural norms. The study also found that this desire or preference of a particular sex over the other particularly males, most times creates unnecessary tension in the marriage and can lead to marital dissolution. Marriages with no male children were more likely to be unstable and may end in a divorce or separation. The study also found that males with no male children were more likely to marry more wives. While women with no male children were on the whole unhappy as it affected the stability of their marriage.

Perhaps, it is pertinent to state here that, although there is literature on both the determinants of marital dissolution and sex preference for children, no study in the state has ever examined the effect of the sex composition of children in the family as a factor in marital dissolution. In this study therefore it was hypothesized that there is a relationship between sex preference and marital instability. This hypothesis was confirmed following a set of questions that were raised for the males and female respondents. It was discovered that couples with at least one male had a lower chance of marital dissolution than couples with one female, that is to say that the presence of at least one male child in the family in the first three years of marriage decreases the likelihood of marital instability. This goes to confirm what Merrill and Constaline (1998) found out in countries like Bangladesh, Indonesia, Colombia, Venezuela and Ghana. Marriage, as it has been found, provides a measure of the reality in assessing the cost and benefit of children relative to a couples short and long term goals. Indeed, among many groups, marriage is not the final transition to adulthood but childbearing and child rearing that makes one fully adult. Thus according Lundberg and Rose (2003), the birth of a son relative a daughter increases both the quality and stability of the marriage. Having at least a male child reduces the mothers' perception of the likelihood of a divorce. Several studies (Katzev et al,1996; Heaton and Albrecht,1995;Barnett and Baruch,2006) have also confirmed that both partners in marriage with sons have a higher level of marital satisfaction than do husbands and wives with only daughters. Also confirmed is the fact that Kohler et al, (2004) agree that the birth of a first child increases reported happiness, and that men enjoy an almost 75 percent more happiness from the birth a first born son than a first born daughter. This situation is however understood in this context, in the light of the traditional, cultural and religious perceptions, attitudes and behaviors relating to marriage and child bearing in Cross River State.

The traditional African society is rooted in patriarchy where women cannot hold traditional titles and headship; couples tend to desire more male children who will take over from them when they are no more and from where descent and ancestry will be perpetuated (Caldwell and Caldwell 1997). According to Ottong, (1997), in most rural areas women are seen as properties purchased by men. They are expected to obey their husbands, get pregnant when they want them to, and in most occasions any disobedience may earn them a separation or divorce. Thus the more a woman sees herself as tied to the apron of the husband, the more children

she bears. This cultural position attributed to women and the roles they play seem to be the major reason why women and indeed couples prefer male to female children. This is why Tickamyer (2001) maintains that sex role attitudes related to being either male or female measured directly, may have an effect on the sex of children desired and ultimately on fertility, acting as mediator between social background variables and the dependent variable.

IV. Conclusion and Recommendations

The problems associated with population are recognized the world over particularly as they affect developing countries of Africa, an organized world effort is therefore needed to change the attitude of people towards sex and fertility preferences, family size, marital stability and other fertility related issues. Based on the factors that enhance sex preference, fertility as well as marital stability already identified. The following recommendations are therefore made.

Improvement in the status of women is very crucial in the task of reducing population growth rate. In empowering the women, they could assume and perform most of the roles performed by men in the society, which includes title inheritance, and carrying on the lineage. To improve the status of women will require the government and non-governmental organization (NGOs) to increase alternatives to marriage, such as education and employment which not only lead to delayed age at marriage but also provides them with choices as well as the confidence that they can achieve anything whether they are male or female. Improvement in the status of women will also enhance their role and participation in the development process. Rural based programs geared toward bettering the lot of the rural women should be vigorously pursued. This is sure to affect the social and economic forces which would further help, to change the character of marriage and fertility in Nigeria

Alongside the emphasis and attention by government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on family planning campaign, there is an equally urgent need to pursue those policies that will lead to the upliftment of the peoples socio-economic conditions where it is hoped that this will lead to the appreciation of small family sizes at the individual level. Therefore, if government ever aims at changing the demographic culture especially in the rural areas, then rural development programs and efforts must assume an aggressive dimension, it is in fact in the opening of the rural areas that family planning and population regulation programs and campaigns can be more easily and positively enhanced.

Moreover, population education should be encouraged, government should draw up and include in the curriculum of primary and post primary education issues of population. It is believed that if young people become acquainted with population issues early enough, it will help in no small measure to reduce the fertility rate.

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