Fertility Differentials of Jewish Women Living in Israel and the West Bank

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Background

At first sight, studying the fertility of Jewish women in Israel and the West Bank can seem odd considering the fact that the whole population of the country is of 7.3 million inhabitants (*Statistical Abstract of Israel*, 2010, table 2.1) which is less than one percent of the world population. However, it has been noted that this small population is unique in terms of its demography, e.g., Fargues (2000) and Anson and Meir (1996).

Israel is one of the most fertile developed countries in the world and has had a stable fertility rate since 1995. The country successfully avoided the dramatic fall in fertility that has been observed in most Western countries. The fertility rate was of 3.85 children per woman in 1960-1964 and decreased to 2.96 children per woman in 2008 (*Statistical Abstract of Israel*, 2010, table 3.13). Maintaining such a high fertility level could be due to immigration and the "demographic war" between the different communities living in the country as it has been suggested by many researchers. Courbage (1999) has said that "(…) the demographic future of Jews and Palestinians, for now and the foreseeable future, will be determined by decisions taken within the family, decisions about having or not having a child, advancing or delaying a birth". Indeed, such a study cannot be conducted without keeping the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in mind.

However, a significant difference between the levels of fertility within the Israeli population has been observed for several years. In the literature, studies of fertility in Israel are conducted at a national level, which neither reveals nor explains the differences. Accordingly, Israel's high fertility deserves a particular attention.

Region	Mean CEB	Std. Dev.
Israel (without the West Bank)	1.88	1.71
West Bank	2.84	1.98

Source: *General Social Survey* of Israel, 2004

Jewish women living in the West Bank clearly have a higher fertility than their counterparts in the West Bank. For this matter, this project aims to identify the different factors that affect the fertility of Jewish women living in Israel and in the West Bank. It will contribute to a better understanding of the fertility behavior of the Jewish population of the West Bank and may shed light on the complex mechanisms that govern the relations between Jews and Arabs in the Occupied Territories.

The literature on fertility differentials is substantial and a number of studies have extensively used a series of socio-economic and demographic variables to explain the differences. These papers are used as a framework to establish the predictor variables. Few researches have used *religiosity* as a predictor for fertility. However it is suggested (Zhang, 2008) that this is an important variable. In the literature, there are a number of theories on the impact of religiosity on fertility. This variable is also considered in the analytical framework.

Data

The data from the General Social Survey of Israel of 2004 are used for this paper. Its main purpose is to provide up-to-date information on the *de jure* population of Israel and on their living conditions. The survey sample contains 7,616 persons aged 20 and older. When removing men and non-Jewish Israelis, 2,189 respondents remained for the present paper.

Methods

The analysis is confined to Jewish women aged 20 to 55. Initially, univariate or descriptive analysis is used to describe the percentage and number of respondents according to all the religious, socio-economic and demographic variables chosen (religiosity, education, monthly family income, employment status, country of origin, age and marital status).

The mean number of children ever born (CEB) and the independent variables are analyzed in a bivariate analysis using a one-way ANOVA to examine the association between children ever born and women's religious, socio-economic and demographic characteristics.

Finally, the net effect of each of the predictor variables on the outcome of interest after controlling for the effect of other predictors is measured via Poisson regressions. The analysis is performed separately for women of Israel and the West Bank in both bivariate and multivariate analyses. Before producing the Poisson regressions, a correlation matrix is applied to make sure that there is no multi-colinearity ($r<0.6$) between each pair of independent variables and the dependant variable.

Results

Even though respondents live in two different regions, most of their socio-economic and demographic characteristics are similar. The main difference relies in their religiosity.

Despite comparable socio-economic and demographic characteristics, considerable differences in the mean number of CEB remain. Israeli women start having children later than women in the West Bank. Differences in the mean number of CEB between religious and non-religious women are much more important in Israel than in the West Bank. Religious women in Israel have more than twice as many children than non-religious women compared to only 1.3 times more children in the West Bank. No matter the region of residence, religious women have about the same mean number of CEB (3.07 in Israel and 3.18 in the West Bank). There is a significant difference in the mean number of CEB of native born and immigrants in Israel. Immigrants have a slightly higher mean number of children.

The Poisson regressions are produced to shed the light on the factors that have the greatest impact on the fertility of Jewish women in the two regions. The results show that even though people are proportionally a lot more religious in the West Bank, religiosity has a bigger impact on fertility in Israel than in the West Bank. The small minority of religious people living in Israel is known to be very orthodox and their fertility is very high compared to the rest of the Israeli population. Being religious as opposed to non-religious increases the expected number of CEB by 93% in Israel and by 74% in the West Bank. Education comes out as the socio-economic variable with the greatest impact on fertility in both regions. It significantly reduces the expected number of CEB in both regions but its impact is stronger in the West Bank. For women with a post secondary non-academic diploma, it decreases of 18% as opposed to 12% in the rest of the

country. Having a university diploma decreases the expected number of CEB by 21% in Israel and 16% in the West Bank. Most demographic variables impact fertility in a similar matter in both regions. Still, it has been noted that the duration of the marital union has a greater impact on fertility in Israel. This might be due to the fact that marriage is not as automatic in Israel as in the West Bank considering that more people are religious in the West Bank. Indeed, women who have been married for 11 years or more in Israel see their expected number of CEB increased of 210% compared to women who are not married or married for a year. In the West Bank, the impact is of 120%.

In sum, the most important variables in the explanation of the high Jewish fertility in Israel and the West Bank are as expected religiosity, education and marital status. It was however not expected that they would impact on the regions the way they do. Because the West Bank is home to many religious people, it was expected that religiosity would have a much bigger impact in the West Bank than in Israel. Also, given the religious nature of its population, it wasn't expected that education would have such an important role in decreasing the mean number of CEB in the West Bank.

Conclusion

Women in Israel and the West Bank are essentially influenced by the same religious, socioeconomic and demographic variables. The impact of these variables on fertility is the same for the women in the two regions studied but the impact varies in intensity. Indeed, religiosity, age and marital status have a stronger impact on fertility in Israel but the impact of education on fertility is greater in the West Bank.

Even though it has been possible to highlight the impact of a certain number of variables on the fertility of Jewish women living in Israel and the West Bank, it is clear that the limited data available in the survey didn't allow measuring the whole phenomenon. Indeed, if both groups have a similar socio-economic and demographic background and are influenced by the same variables and the results show that religiosity itself is not enough to explain the differences; we must look elsewhere for further answers. Perhaps looking into nationalism or secularization in a forthcoming paper.

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