Like mother, like daughter and also like mother-in-law?
Influence of older generation's fertility behaviours on daughter's family size preferences in India

Background

It is well documented that parents are of great importance in shaping preferences and behaviours of young adults. A wide array of studies, mainly on Western developed countries has shown such an intergenerational transmission with respect to fertility preferences (Axinn et al. 1994; Buehler and philipov 2005) and number of children ever born (Pearsons et al. 1899; Murphy and Knudsen 2002; Murphy and Wang 2001). Continuities in parent-child fertility have implications for population size and structure since people born into large families are themselves more likely to make an above-average contribution to succeeding generations. According to the principle of linked lives (Elder 1977; 1994), parental behaviours during childhood significantly influences both desires and behaviours of children in adulthood. Empirical evidence has confirmed that individuals learn and incorporate the preferences and behaviours of relevant others in order to make the own decisions. Likewise, research on developing countries has shown that living in an extended family is associated with higher fertility (Easterlin, 1978), but so far very little is known about intergenerational transmissions of fertility preferences in such contexts (see Murphy 2013 for a review of the rare studies on intergenerational transmission of fertility in non-Western countries).

This paper contributes to this line of research by studying the influence of mother's and mother-in-law's fertility behaviour on young women's fertility preferences in northern rural India using primary data collected in 2011. According to the socialisation of value's perspective (Preston 1976), ideals and preferences on childbearing in the parent generation are important determinants of their children's fertility. However, in Indian society, especially in the north where the practice of patrilineal descent and patrilocal residence is widespread, commonly married young women move to live with their husband's family and are absorbed into their husband's lineage (Jejeebhoy and Sathar 2001). In such kinship system, men hold a central position in the family while older women wield the main authority over household affairs (Das Gupta et al. 2003). This leaves a young bride little autonomy over her family life. In this peculiar context, intergenerational transmission of fertility may differ greatly from that of the Western societies. This study hence aims to shed light on intergenerational transmission mechanisms in rural areas of north India, where fertility remains well above the replacement rate, contraception use is not widespread and young women are rather confined in a secluded environment of their husband's family.

Data

The present study is based on primary data from 450 pairs of index women (IW) i.e., women central in our analysis and mother-in-law (MIL) collected in Bihar, a rural area located in north-

eastern India. Each IW-MIL pair was co-residing and sharing the same kitchen at the time of interview.

IW and MIL were interviewed at the same time, but in a different place in order to avoid misreporting. Each of the 450 IW-MIL pairs was interviewed using a semi-structured schedule. The schedule contained a mix of closed and open-ended questions. IW's schedule contained information on household characteristics, husband's socioeconomic and demographic profiles, individual characteristics, such as education, working status, fertility preferences, fertility history and interaction with MIL on fertility issues. Information on IW's mother was also collected (age, education, total number of children ever born) from IW. MIL's schedule contained information on individual characteristics, fertility history, and fertility preference for IW (i.e. desired number of grandchildren from IW). The sample size of our study is reduced to 440 IW-MIL pairs as we excluded the cases (10) where MIL preference for grandchildren was not reported or reported as "up to God".

Method

Dependent variable

Preferred family size of IW is the dependent variable classified into three categories: low, medium and high. This variable is derived from a widely investigated measure of desired family size, the Coombs scale, which is found to produce the most accurate indicator of fertility preferences accounting for latent preferences (Coombs 1974, 1978, 1979).

Explanatory variables

We used four key explanatory variables in order to test our hypotheses on the influence of biological mother's and MIL's fertility patterns and MIL's preference for grandchildren on desired family size of IW.

i) Mother's number of children ever born
ii) Mother's education
iii) Mother-in-law's number of children ever born
iv) Mother-in-law's preferred number of grandchildren

Preferred family size of IW is estimated using the ordered logistic regression model which is an appropriate method for an ordinal response variable.

Results

Table 1 presents the bivariate associations between IW's family size preferences and independent variables of interest.

Table 1: Family size preference of IW across selected background characteristics and p-value from Chi-square test (or anova test in case of continuous variables) for each variable

	Family size preference of IW			*P-value*
	Low	Medium	High	chi2/ANOVA
IW's characteristics				
Age				
16-24 years	42.5	45.8	11.7	
25-29 years	38.7	33.1	28.2	
30-34 years	29.6	39.8	30.6	0.001
Education				
Uneducated	17.6	42.6	39.7	
1-5 years of schooling	30.9	44.7	24.5	
6-10 years of schooling	39.9	38.1	22.0	
11+ years of schooling	48.3	33.3	18.3	0.003
Husband's characteristics				
Education				
Uneducated	25.0	32.5	42.5	
1-5 years of schooling	34.9	32.6	32.6	
6+ years of schooling	37.0	41.2	21.8	0.039
Working status				
No	32.6	43.5	23.9	
Yes	37.1	37.7	25.2	0.502
Household's characteristics				
Economic status				
Low	30.3	37.9	31.7	
Middle	35.9	40.0	24.1	
High	40.7	40.7	18.7	0.113
Caste				
SC/ST	36.0	36.0	28.0	
OBC	35.8	31.8	32.5	
Other caste	35.5	46.3	18.2	0.243
Religion				
Hindu	36.5	39.5	23.9	
Muslims	27.9	39.5	32.6	0.373
MIL's characteristics				
Total fertility (Mean CEB (s.d.))	4.9 (1.7)	5.5 (1.5)	5.8 (1.5)	0.000
Preferred number of grandchildren from IW (Mean (s.d.))	3.9 (1.0)	4.1 (1.1)	4.2 (1.0)	0.045
Age				
41-49 years	35.2	47.7	17.0	
50-54 years	36.1	35.1	28.9	
>55 years	35.4	40.5	24.1	0.199
Education				
Uneducated	35.9	38.1	26.1	
1-5 years of schooling	28.6	52.4	19.0	
6+ years of schooling	37.1	43.5	19.4	0.575
Interaction with IW on childbearing issues				
Never	28.9	43.0	28.1	
Sometimes	39.2	40.1	20.7	
More often	35.4	34.3	30.3	0.164
Mother's characteristics				
Total fertility (Mean CEB (s.d.))	5.1 (1.5)	5.4 (1.6)	5.4 (1.7)	0.119

Education				
Uneducated	33.2	39.1	27.8	
1-5 years of schooling	37.8	48.6	13.5	
6+ years of schooling	62.5	34.4	3.1	0.002
Education gap between IW vs. husband				
IW's education=Husband's education - both are literate	43.9	36.4	19.7	
IW and husband are illiterate	18.2	18.2	63.6	
IW's education>Husband's education	36.8	34.5	28.7	
IW's education<Husband's education	34.1	42.8	23.2	0.037
Education gap between IW vs. MIL				
IW education ≤ MIL education	20.2	46.2	33.7	
IW education > MIL education	40.5	37.5	22.0	0.001
Total (N = 440)	35.7	39.6	24.8	

As displayed in Table 1, the preferred family size of IW differs significantly by educational attainment of IW. The preference for a smaller family grows with increasing years of education. Among the highest educated women (i.e. with more than 10 years of schooling), the preference is mainly (48%) for a small family. Educational attainment of biological mother and husband is also negatively and significantly associated with IW's preferred family size. Moreover, if both IW and husband are illiterate, IW expressed preference of a large family size while for couples where both partners are literate, IW tend to prefer small family size. In particular, if the IW is more educated than the husband, she reports more often a preference for small family size. While the educational attainments of the MIL is not significantly different in the association with IW's preferred family size, its combination with IW's educational attainment suggests that if IW has a higher education than MIL, she desires a smaller family size.

The estimation from the ordered logistic regression (results not shown here) shows that net of the effects of IW individual characteristics, education of biological mother is inversely associated with family size preference. Besides, the effects of MIL's preferred number of grandchildren remain statistically significant. However, in the case where IW have higher education than MIL, their preferred family size gets smaller.

Discussion

Our findings show that in the context of northern rural India, intergenerational transmission of fertility preference is more intense from the in-law family to younger female generation as compared to biological family. However, if the younger generation is highly education and, in particular, has higher education than the mother-in-law, her preferred family size gets smaller.

References

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