Seasonal migration induced spousal separation and infertility: Growing evidences demand significance in developing countries

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Abstract

Based on secondary literature, this paper discusses a comparatively less analyzed fact in study of health and demography; the connection between seasonal migration and infertility. As reported, seasonal migration by husbands in many contexts significantly interrupts sexual activities, contraceptive use and results in lower birth rate which potentially incurs infertility in long run. Not only in developing world, are developed countries also facing challenges of frequent seasonal migration that influences transition in population structure declining birth rates. Further research and studies could help in collecting and documenting more evidence for analysis the association between seasonal migration and lower birth rate affecting health and population structure. Association with seasonal migration induced gap in sexual relationship in families and lower birth rates leading to infertility needs more attention in exploring facts and correlations for articulation of better policy and health planning in poor and undeveloped health care settings.

Keywords: Seasonal, Migration, Spousal separation, Developing courtiers, Infertility

Introduction

Fertility, mortality and migration are three well established and prime determinants in study of population growth and health demography. Regardless of geographical difference, any combination of these determinants can impact the whole population structure, health outcomes and related policies (Del Pinal, 2008). Demographic and other researches show that lower fertility rate (birth rate) has negative consequence on population and health such as increasing the number of older population to care (Linacre, 2005) and lessening the number of working age and productive younger population (Adsera, 2004; Galor & Weil, 1993; Moe, 1998). As we know from theoretical analysis that, migration can have dual impact on population growth depending on the context. For example, in developed country like USA, Hispanic migration was found to be as reason for fertility increase (Johnson & Lichter, 2008; Martin & Midgely, 1999) while, in many developing countries seasonal and temporary migration result decline in birth rate ( Chattopadhyay, White, & Debpuur, 2006; Menjivar & Agadjanian, 2007).

It is well recognized that the effect of seasonal migration on fertility is important as socio-environmental determinants of population health must be understood for better preparedness against future health risks those are induced by migration patterns. Seasonal or temporary migration is now not only a matter of developing countries but it becomes an emerging issue in many developed countries those are facing natural disaster due climate change (e.g., tsunami, flood or tornado). Because of increasing seasonal migration, many risks for population health increased (e.g. infectious disease); fertility transition could be one of the significant outcomes (Massey & Mullan, 1984; Sevoyan, 2011). Therefore, the correlation and association between seasonal migration and lower fertility rate is quite curious and interesting to analyze in answering queries like why seasonal migration is so important and how does it affects fertility transition in a particular population? Based on published literature review and a national demographic survey analysis, this paper aims to explore the correlation and association between spousal separation by seasonal migration and lower birth rate leading infertility in developing county contexts. Evidences as a case is drawn from Bangladesh as this country is one of the perfect examples of such enquiry because of its highly populated and geographically variant nature with climatic divergent characteristics such as disaster induced seasonal migration at a higher level.

Lower fertility rates & reasons behind

Recent studies identified reasons behind declining birth rates across the world shows difference in data between developed country and developing countries. For instance in many high income countries reasons for declining fertility are cost of childbearing (McDonald, 2000), gender discrimination in occupational sectors (restricting women’s choice if they have children) and government policy changes regarding childbearing and family (Andersson, 2005; Crittenden, 2002; McDonald, 2002, 2006).

However, the factors associated with lower birth rates could be different in many other contexts for instance, education, family planning programs or seasonal migration. Like Bangladesh, data from many developing countries raise an interesting question whether spousal separation through seasonal migration can reduce the

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Seasonal migration and fertility transition: evidences are growing

The relation between migration (international) and fertility is being studied in high income countries those may have a situation like “declining economies” (Bradatan & Firebaugh, 2007; Davis, 1963) but seasonal migration for short time are more prevalent in developing countries (Iredale, 2001) and this consistently reported in population research over decades. For example, studies in Mexico showed that, short term migration of male members reduced birth rate among families and interrupted the regular age form of fertility (Lindstrom & Saucedo, 2002; Massey & Mullan, 1984). Similar evidences were reported in many developing county context such as India, Nepal, Tajikistan and sub-Saharan Africa (Ban, Kariki, Shrestha, & Hodgins, 2012; Bhagat, 2011; Brockerhoff & Yang, 1994; Clifford, 2009).

Using 2007 survey data from 31 rural village of Armenia, Sevoyan (2011) investigated the continuing consequence of seasonal migration on fertility and found that husband’s migration status had negative impact on birth probability among wives in a given year. The study results showed, “being a seasonal migrant is associated with 7 percent increased odds of having an additional child, not controlling for other factors, and this effect is statistically significant” (Sevoyan, 2011). Decline in fertility rate was reported due to the success of FP programs in many countries (Bongaarts & Sinding, 2009) however, these evidences indicate that, besides other socio-environmental demographic factors of population health, seasonal migration has a major influencing role in changing fertility forms and more likely resulting in lower birth rate. The separation length might act as disrupting factor in family planning; the timing and level of separation and influences contraceptive prevalence rates, lower birth rate leading infertility.

Bangladesh has large scale labor migration flows stirring both internal and international migration with various motives for displacement. According to the 2011 Bangladesh DHS, in both national and international level of migration, between 40-77% of migrating husbands return to the household at least once per year and approximately 12% of currently married women have a husband who lives elsewhere (National Institute of Population Research and Training (NIPORT), Mitra and Associates, & ICF International, 2013). Similar indications were reported in the latest version of the Bangladesh DHS report in 2014 however, the correlation between men’s seasonal migration and infertility was not that much focused in that one therefore, data from previous Demographic and Health Survey in 2011 is used in this case which reveals an interesting link saying that, “Repeated seasonal migration has the potential to lower birth rates. The effect of spousal separation in reducing fertility varies with the length of separation”. Notably, the family planning status, needs and decisions among momentarily separated couples due to husbands’ migration could be significantly different from those who are continuously cohabiting although spousal separation does not necessarily mean a death of coital activity (Khan, MacQuarrie, Nahar, & Sultana, 2016).

However, this prediction comes from the data showing that, 12.2% of women (12.9% in rural and 10.1% in urban, N= 16,635) mentioned that their husbands are living elsewhere (migrated for economic reason). The data also showed that, spousal separation through migration affect sexual activities as only 11.7% of married women (aged 15-49, N=17,749) had sexual intercourse during last one year (National Institute of Population Research and Training (NIPORT) et al., 2013). This data seems interesting and raise need of more evidence of the fertility impact of spousal separation due to migration in particular population. A 2011 study in Mozambique represents another evidence of the issue how spousal separation occurred through migration and affected total fertility. The study reported that, “husband’s migration is associated with a significantly lower rate of birth in any given year, net of other characteristics…..the rate of having a birth is 17% higher for women whose husbands were present in the village in the previous year” (Agadjanian et al., 2011). However, these evidences are given less attention in mainstream research, literature and policy implementation agendas.

Conclusion

The growing evidences of lower birth rate due to seasonal migration is potentially leading to infertility and becoming an alarming sign for many countries particularly, in case of shaping population and fertility structure. Further research and closer observation of these evidences must be examined in both research and policy reformation for developing strategic action for betterment of community health and for study of population health and demographics. This is not only important for declining economies but high income countries should also be aware where internal migration is increasing rapidly which can affect fertility and mortality ratio and, population health structure. As we see, the way global migration patterns are changing due to climate change and natural disasters, we all should give importance in combination of migration (both permanent and seasonal) and fertility interaction in demographic study on population health. This also means we should keep in mind that, socio-environmental determinants in population health are dynamic and can bring different outcomes in different context.
Competing interest

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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