

5 Preferred Birth Intervals

5.1 "BEST" LENGTH

To determine the norm governing the length of birth intervals, a question on the "best" length was included in 16 of the surveys in DHS-II:

"What do you think is the best number of months or years between the birth of one child and the birth of the next child?"

Virtually all responses to this question were two, three or four years, with a few countries showing some frequency at

five years (Table 5.1).¹¹ This question was asked of both ever-married and never-married women (where interviewed), but the comparison shows little difference.

There is little systematic variation across countries for this variable. Few women in any country think that an interval of less than 24 months is optimal. An interval between two and four years captures by far the highest frequency of response. Only in Turkey does a high proportion fall in the five-or-more-years category, with 15 percent indicating a preference for six or more years. The mean for ever-married women in the 16 countries is 29 months.

¹¹ The medians were calculated on the basis of all numerical responses, not just those reported in full years.

Table 5.1 Best length of birth interval

Percent distribution of women, according to "best" length-of-birth interval, Demographic and Health Surveys, 1990-94

Country ^a	Interval in months for ever-married women						Total	Median interval in months	
	<24	24	36	48	60	72+		Ever-married women	Never-married women
Sub-Saharan Africa									
Burkina Faso	2	21	57	15	4	1	100	30	30
Ghana	1	15	43	24	11	6	100	34	34
Kenya	3	21	38	19	15	5	100	32	32
Madagascar	6	39	34	13	6	2	100	26	24
Malawi	5	47	35	8	4	1	100	24	24
Namibia	18	47	19	7	5	5	100	23	22
Niger	3	49	41	5	1	--	100	24	26
Senegal	3	40	46	8	3	--	100	26	26
Tanzania	3	43	42	7	4	1	100	30	31
Zambia	10	57	26	5	2	--	100	23	24
Near East/North Africa									
Egypt	2	43	38	11	5	1	100	31	U
Morocco	4	31	28	21	9	7	100	30	U
Turkey	2	14	24	22	23	15	100	41	U
Asia									
Philippines	4	28	36	13	14	5	100	30	28
Latin America/Caribbean									
Dominican Republic	17	41	26	7	7	2	100	23	21
Peru	7	30	28	15	15	6	100	30	26

-- Less than 0.5 percent

U = Unknown (not available)

^a The question was not asked in the countries excluded here.

5.2 PREFERRED LENGTH OF NEXT BIRTH INTERVAL

As indicated above, women who said that they wanted another child were asked how long they wanted to wait. To estimate the length of the interval preferred between births, the response to this question was added to the length of time that had elapsed since the birth of the last child (or to the time since marriage for women with no births). Thus, the length of this "open interval" plus the desired waiting time is one measure of the woman's preferred length of birth intervals. Because subfecund women can be expected to contribute longer open intervals than these women might have preferred, the calculation is limited to women classified as fecund as well as to those who want another child.¹²

The first observation (Table 5.2) is that these estimated lengths of preferred next-birth intervals are considerably longer than the intervals regarded as optimal ("best" interval length). They tend to exceed the average length of the "best" interval by a year or two, though there is some correlation between the two averages across countries. Of course, the two measures are based on different questions. The "best" interval may be a much more idealistic concept than the woman's own preference in her individual circumstances. It may also be true that some women, even though fecund, may have already waited longer than they would have preferred in retrospect, and negative responses were not possible. This is probably the main reason that this measure of preferred interval length is so much longer than the normative response based on the question about the "best" length of the interval. Another difference between the two questions is that the preferred next interval is based in part on the responses to the question about how long the woman would like to wait until the birth of the next child, which was asked only of women who want another child.¹³

The average woman who wants more children prefers a next-birth interval that ranges from a low of 35 months in Pakistan to a high of 67 months in Indonesia (see

Table 5.2). Peru also shows a median exceeding 5 years (64 months) and Zimbabwe exactly 5 years, while Niger, Nigeria and Jordan are the remaining countries along with Pakistan with a median below 40 months. Most countries with long preferred intervals show long open intervals (intervals since the last birth). The overall average time that women prefer between the last birth and the next birth for all 28 countries is four years.

The median preferred interval has increased in length in the 11 countries represented in both phases of the DHS by an average of seven months (Table 5.3). This reflects an increase in both components of the preferred interval (the length of time since the last birth because of greater regulation of fertility) as well as some increase in the actual preferred additional waiting time. On average, the length of the preferred interval increased from 47 to 54 months over a roughly 5-year period between surveys. Of this 7-month increase, 3 months are attributable to a longer open interval (the effect of increased fertility regulation) and 4 months to preferences for longer spacing between births. In the sub-Saharan African countries, almost all of an average 9-month increase is the result of a change in preference, as the length of the open interval increased only slightly. In the four Latin American countries, a 7-month overall increase was equally divided between the two components of change.

5.3 PREFERRED LENGTH OF LAST BIRTH INTERVAL

There is another approach to measuring the preferred length of birth intervals, and that is to focus on a woman's report of the planning status of her last birth. For each birth reported in the last five years, the woman was asked:

"At the time you became pregnant with (name), did you want to become pregnant *then*, did you want to wait until *later*, or did you want *no (more)* children at all?"

The length of the intervals for women who wanted the pregnancy *then* can be considered a measure of preference, although as with the measure of the preferred next interval, it does not admit the response that the woman wanted to become pregnant sooner than she did. The median dura-

¹² It is also true that fecund women could have longer intervals than they prefer simply by chance or for other reasons, for example, their husbands may be away.

¹³ Restricting the "best" interval calculation to women who want another child does not alter the average of 29 months.

Table 5.2 Preferred length of next birth interval for women who want another child

Percent distribution of preferred length of next birth interval among fecund currently married women who want another child, according to length of interval, Demographic and Health Surveys, 1990-94

Country	Length of next birth interval in months							Percent total	Median length of interval in months	Median preferred length in months
	<24	24-35	36-47	48-59	60-71	72-83	84+			
Sub-Saharan Africa										
Burkina Faso	7	16	30	20	13	6	8	100	18	45
Cameroon	9	25	22	14	11	5	14	100	18	44
Ghana	4	9	17	21	16	13	19	100	19	58
Kenya	10	11	17	18	15	11	17	100	17	54
Madagascar	11	21	26	19	10	6	7	100	15	42
Malawi	5	28	27	17	10	5	7	100	11	41
Namibia	13	24	21	15	8	6	12	100	21	42
Niger	9	28	31	17	9	3	4	100	16	39
Nigeria	17	26	25	15	7	4	5	100	16	38
Rwanda	8	10	20	21	19	11	11	100	14	54
Senegal	9	22	27	18	11	6	7	100	16	42
Sudan	13	26	24	17	10	5	6	100	16	40
Tanzania	9	22	26	18	11	6	8	100	17	43
Zambia	11	26	27	17	8	4	7	100	15	42
Zimbabwe	8	10	15	16	17	11	22	100	23	60
Near East/North Africa										
Egypt	14	22	24	16	11	6	7	100	15	41
Jordan	19	23	24	14	10	5	5	100	12	38
Morocco	15	15	19	16	11	9	14	100	17	48
Turkey	14	11	14	15	15	12	19	100	16	54
Asia										
Bangladesh	13	10	14	13	18	13	19	100	18	59
Indonesia	8	8	11	12	17	14	31	100	24	67
Pakistan	21	27	22	16	6	4	3	100	14	35
Philippines	8	13	21	16	14	9	19	100	17	53
Latin America/Caribbean										
Bolivia	7	13	17	16	16	9	21	100	23	56
Colombia	10	12	15	15	15	9	25	100	25	58
Dominican Republic	14	18	20	12	14	8	14	100	17	46
Paraguay	9	14	18	15	15	9	19	100	22	53
Peru	6	10	15	13	16	11	30	100	26	64

Table 5.3 Trends in length of birth interval

Trends in the preferred length in months of next birth interval for fecund, currently married women in countries participating in two surveys, Demographic and Health Surveys, 1986-94

Country	Length of preferred next interval: DHS-I			Length of preferred next interval: DHS-II or DHS-III		
	Total	Open interval	Additional waiting time	Total	Open interval	Additional waiting time
Sub-Saharan Africa						
Ghana	49	18	31	58	19	39
Kenya	44	15	29	54	17	37
Senegal	36	18	18	42	16	26
Zimbabwe	49	20	29	60	23	37
Near East/North Africa						
Egypt	36	12	24	41	15	26
Morocco	42	19	23	48	17	31
Asia						
Indonesia	66	24	42	67	24	43
Latin America/Caribbean						
Bolivia	49	19	30	56	23	33
Colombia	53	23	30	58	25	33
Dominican Republic	39	15	24	46	17	29
Peru	57	20	37	64	26	38

tions of the last interbirth interval are displayed in Table 5.4¹⁴ for each of the three planning-status categories. Our primary interest lies in the interval lengths preceding births reported as wanted *then*. The average for the 28 countries is 34 months, with little regional variation. As would be expected, the average for the births wanted *later* is considerably lower, 27 months.

The length of this preferred interval has increased in all of the nine countries that participated in both stages of the DHS and in which the planning-status question was

asked (Table 5.5). This is consistent with, but not as marked as, the trend in the length of the preferred next interval (as shown in Table 5.3).

The three measures described here yield rather different estimates of the preferred length of birth intervals. This is understandable, because these measures reflect different dimensions: an abstract ideal, preferences for the next interval, and reactions to the length of the last interval. Intervals between 2½ and 4 years cover most of the range.

¹⁴ The calculations are confined to currently married women with at least two births (i.e., to women with an interbirth interval), whose last birth occurred in the past five years (only women with a birth in this period were asked the question on planning status).

Table 5.4 Median length of last birth interval

Median length in months of the last birth interval for currently married women with two or more births, by planning status of the last birth, Demographic and Health Surveys, 1990-94

Country	Planning status of last birth			Total
	Wanted then	Wanted later	Not wanted	
Sub-Saharan Africa				
Burkina Faso	36	32	37	34
Cameroon	32	27	31	31
Ghana	41	34	41	37
Kenya	33	27	31	30
Madagascar	29	24	29	29
Malawi	35	29	30	32
Namibia	35	27	36	34
Niger	32	25	32	30
Nigeria	31	27	36	30
Rwanda	35	29	31	32
Senegal	34	28	34	32
Sudan	32	26	34	30
Tanzania	33	30	34	33
Zambia	32	28	34	31
Zimbabwe	42	32	44	37
Near East/North Africa				
Egypt	32	22	34	32
Jordan	26	19	25	25
Morocco	33	27	33	33
Turkey	40	23	34	35
Asia				
Bangladesh	37	32	35	35
Indonesia	42	33	46	36
Pakistan	32	25	32	29
Philippines	32	24	31	29
Latin America/Caribbean				
Bolivia	33	25	30	31
Colombia	43	23	31	33
Dominican Republic	33	22	30	28
Paraguay	31	21	30	30
Peru	39	25	31	32

Note: Data are restricted to women with a birth in the last five years.

Table 5.5 Trends in median length of last birth interval

Trends in median length in months of last birth interval among currently married women with two or more births who wanted the last child at that time, Demographic and Health Surveys, 1986-94

Country	DHS-I	DHS-II or DHS-III
Sub-Saharan Africa		
Ghana	36	41
Kenya	30	33
Near East/North Africa		
Egypt	30	31
Morocco	31	33
Asia		
Indonesia	36	42
Latin America/Caribbean		
Bolivia	30	33
Colombia	34	43
Dominican Republic	32	33
Peru	35	39