4 Fertility Preferences

Ideal family size (IFS) marks the boundaries of socially acceptable reproductive behavior (Westoff, 1991). Changes over time in ideal family size may indicate shifts in attitude that are believed to precede changes in behavior. Ideal family size is of limited utility in predicting actual behavior. Depending on the respondent's reference point, IFS may represent reproductive behavior under the best or worst possible conditions of childbearing. Individual rationalizations may affect reported numbers of IFS and some have considered this measure to be the most biased indicator of fertility desires (Bongaarts, 1990; Pritchett, 1994).

Table 4.1 shows great regional variations in mean IFS reported by currently married men, with the highest numbers reported in West Africa. In three of the five countries in this region for which information is available, the mean ideal family size desired by men exceeds 10 children. In East Africa, male fertility desires are much lower than in West Africa, but they are higher than levels reported in North Africa and Asia.

Since IFS is influenced by current fertility, the responses for desired number of children are biased toward the respondent's actual number of surviving children. Male fertility may be influenced by polygyny levels in a country. Given that countries in West Africa have higher levels of polygyny than those in the other subregions, the effect of these and other individual characteristics of men which could affect their reported fertility desires are controlled for. Differences in the fertility desires of men by their background characteristics are shown in Table 4.1.

Mean ideal family size increases with age in every country, but the trend is most pronounced in West Africa. In Cameroon, for instance, ideal family size rises from 8.8 in the 20-29 year age group to 16.6 for men aged 60 years and over. In contrast, ideal family size in the same age groups increases only from 2.3 to 2.9 in Bangladesh. The positive relationship between IFS and age can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, it may point to changing reproductive norms. Younger men, who tend to be more educated, may be the forerunners of the new reproductive norm, while the preferences of older men may reflect traditional reproductive norms that may soon disappear. On the other hand, older men may be adjusting their fertility desires upward over the life course to accommodate their own growing number of children. This would suggest that there is no real change in underlying reproductive norms among men. For most countries, a combination of both forces is likely to be operating.

Polygynously married men report higher fertility desires than monogamously married men in every country, but the difference in their mean IFS ranges from more than 6 children in Cameroon to less than 0.5 in Bangladesh, Morocco, and Pakistan. Polygynous men in West Africa desire, on average, at least 3 children more than monogamous men. The only exception is Ghana, where the difference in the fertility desires of polygynous and monogamous men dropped from 3.7 children in the 1988 survey to 1.6 in 1993. In East Africa, polygynous men want from 1.6 children (in Rwanda) to 2.4 children (in Burundi and Tanzania) more than do monogamous men. The difference in fertility desires between polygynous and monogamous men narrows to less than 2 children in North Africa and to just 0.4 children in Asia. The high level of polygyny in West Africa, however, does not explain the high fertility desires of men in the area. Monogamous men in West Africa also report higher fertility desires than monogamous men in other regions. If anything, the high levels of polygyny in West Africa may be a response to prevailing reproductive norms.

The ideal family size reported by men increases consistently with the number of surviving children. This trend is more pronounced in West Africa than in other regions. In Senegal, for instance, mean IFS increases from 6.4 for men with no children to 12.3 for those with five or more children. In contrast, IFS only increases from 4.0 to 4.7 in Rwanda and from 2.2 to 2.8 in Bangladesh over the same range of parities. At every parity level, men in West Africa report higher fertility desires than do men in other regions. Among men who have three or four children, for example, ideal family size ranges from 5.2 to 12.1 in the countries surveyed in West Africa; from 3.9 to 7.2 in East Africa; and from 2.5 to 4.2 in the countries surveyed in North Africa and Asia.

Rural-urban differences in men's ideal family size are widest in West Africa. Rural men in West Africa generally desire two to four children more than urban men, except in Niger, which has the highest IFS (rural and urban) of all the countries surveyed. In East Africa, rural men generally desire one child more than urban men; the exception is Tanzania, where rural men desire about two children more, on

Table 4.1 Ideal family size for men by background characteristics

Mean ideal family size preference among currently married men by age, residence, education, type of union and number of children, and among currently married women, Demographic and Health Surveys, 1987-1993

	Currently married men																	Currently married women
	Age group					Residence		Education			Type of union		Number of children					
Country	<30	30-39	40-49	50-59	60+	Urban	Rural	None	Primary	Second-ary or higher	Monog-amy	Polygyny	0	1-2	3-4	5+	Total	Total
West Africa																		
Burkina Faso	6.1	6.7	8.0	8.6	11.0	4.9	8.4	8.6	5.6	3.7	6.9	9.9	6.0	6.3	7.6	9.4	7.8	5.9
Cameroon	8.8	9.5	11.9	13.5	16.6	9.4	12.3	15.3	9.3	6.8	9.8	16.1	8.1	9.3	10.6	13.2	11.2	7.3
Ghana (1988)	6.0	6.7	8.2	9.5	11.1	6.0	8.1	10.4	6.3	5.2	6.8	10.5	6.5	6.2	6.6	9.2	7.6	5.5
Ghana (1993)	4.3	5.1	5.5	6.5	NA	4.1	5.8	7.5	4.7	3.9	5.0	6.7	4.2	4.4	5.2	6.5	5.3	4.7
Mali	U	U	U	U	U	U	U	U	U	U	U	U	U	U	U	U	U	U
Niger	10.7	11.6	13.8	14.2	15.2	11.9	12.8	13.0	11.0	6.9	11.9	15.5	9.3	10.6	12.1	15.9	12.6	8.5
Senegal	8.0	8.9	10.7	11.9	12.1	7.8	11.8	11.7	8.2	5.5	9.0	13.1	6.4	8.0	9.8	12.3	10.4	6.3
East Africa																		
Burundi	4.7	5.4	6.3	5.7	7.0	4.3	5.5	5.7	5.4	4.1	5.3	7.3	5.2	4.6	5.3	6.7	5.5	5.5
Kenya (1989)	3.9	4.5	4.5	5.3	7.7	4.0	4.9	7.1	4.5	4.1	4.3	6.7	3.9	3.8	4.3	5.3	4.8	4.8
Kenya (1993)	3.8	4.0	4.1	5.0	NA	3.5	4.3	6.0	4.2	3.5	3.9	5.5	3.5	3.6	3.9	4.4	4.1	3.9
Malawi	4.6	5.3	6.3	6.4	NA	U	U	5.7	5.5	4.7	5.3	7.4	4.3	4.7	5.1	6.9	5.4	5.3
Rwanda	4.2	4.1	4.2	4.6	6.2	3.7	4.3	4.5	4.2	4.0	4.1	5.7	4.0	4.0	4.1	4.7	4.3	4.4
Tanzania	6.5	6.4	8.9	8.5	7.1	6.0	7.9	9.6	7.1	4.7	7.1	9.5	5.6	6.4	7.2	8.8	7.4	6.4
North Africa																		
Egypt	2.9	3.1	3.6	3.7	5.0	3.1	3.6	3.9	3.3	3.0	3.3	5.1	2.9	2.7	3.2	4.4	3.3	2.8
Morocco	3.2	3.6	4.3	4.8	5.0	3.6	4.4	4.5	3.8	3.1	4.1	4.5	2.9	3.2	3.9	4.9	4.1	3.9
Asia																		
Bangladesh	2.3	2.4	2.6	2.6	2.9	2.3	2.5	2.6	2.5	2.3	2.5	2.9	2.2	2.3	2.5	2.8	2.5	2.5
Pakistan	4.2	4.0	4.5	4.3	4.3	4.0	4.3	4.4	4.7	3.8	4.2	4.6	4.3	4.0	4.0	4.5	4.2	4.1

NA = Not applicable
U = Unknown (not available)

average, than urban men. The effect of education also is strongest in West Africa. Surveys in West African countries found that men with no formal education desire at least twice as many children as those with secondary or higher education. In East Africa, North Africa, and Asia, the differences in IFS by educational level are far smaller, except in Kenya and Tanzania.

Table 4.2 examines ideal family size among currently married women. Overall, women in West Africa report fertility desires that are slightly higher than those of women in East Africa. Women's fertility preferences are lowest in North Africa and Asia. In almost every country, ideal family size increases with the woman's age and the number of her surviving children. Women who live in urban areas, are educated, and are in a monogamous union desire smaller families than their rural, uneducated, and polygynously married peers. Women's fertility desires, like men's, vary more widely in West Africa than in other regions across all the background characteristics examined.

Figure 4.1 and the last columns of Table 4.1 compare mean IFS for currently married men and women. Ideal family size in West Africa is higher for both men and women than in any other region, and the differences between men and women are also much more pronounced there. Men in the West African countries reportedly, on average, desire two (Burkina Faso) to four (Niger and Senegal) children more than women. The second Ghana survey, which found a difference of just 0.6 children, is the exception. In East Africa, there is no difference in the fertility desires of men and women, except in Tanzania where men want, on average, one child more than women. The difference between men's and women's fertility desires is extremely small in North Africa and almost nonexistent in Asia.

Background characteristics do not account for the disparities between men's and women's fertility desires. When men and women with similar background characteristics are compared, men still want more childrenthan women and the differences are greatest in West Africa. Thus, monogamous-

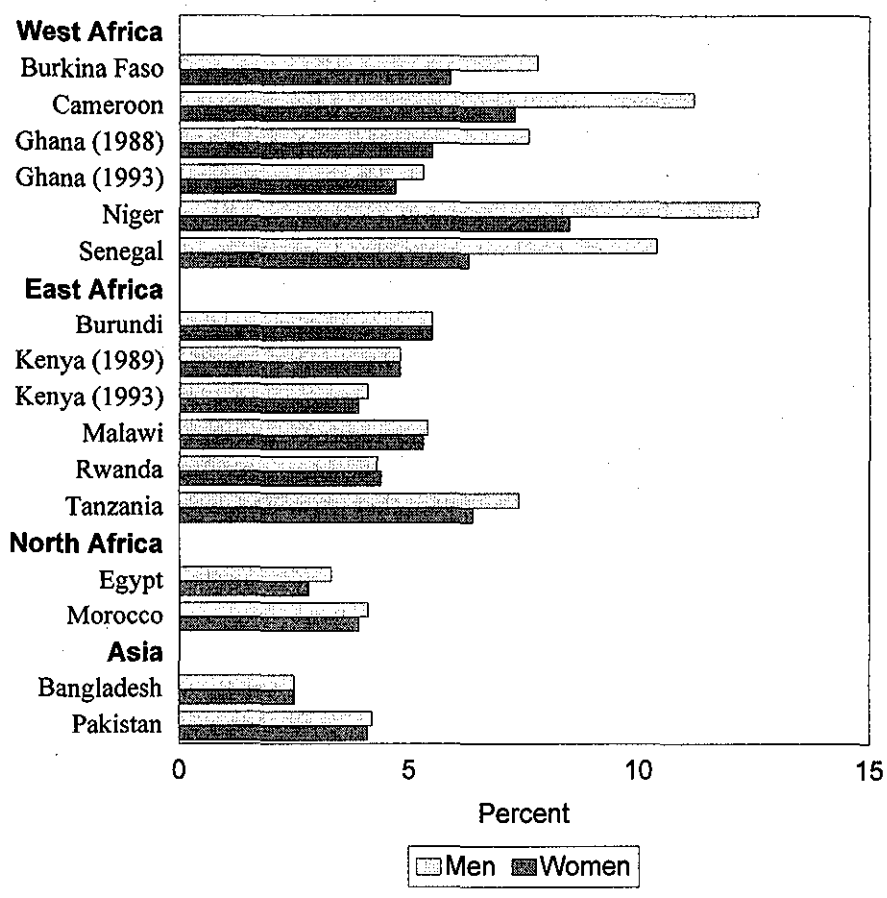
Table 4.2 Ideal family size for women by background characteristics

Mean ideal family size preference among currently married women by age, residence, education, type of union and number of children, Demographic and Health Surveys, 1987-1993

	Age group				Residence		Education			Type of union		Number of children				
Country	<20	20-29	30-39	40-49	Urban	Rural	None	Primary	Secondary or higher	Monogamy	Polygyny	0	1-2	3-4	5+	Total
West Africa																
Burkina Faso	5.8	5.6	6.0	6.7	4.5	6.3	6.2	4.8	3.6	5.6	6.2	5.5	5.6	5.9	6.5	5.9
Cameroon	6.9	6.8	7.7	8.5	6.3	8.0	8.9	6.5	5.0	6.9	8.0	6.6	6.8	7.5	8.1	7.3
Ghana (1988)	5.2	5.2	5.6	6.3	4.9	5.8	6.5	4.9	4.1	5.4	5.8	5.3	5.1	5.6	6.0	5.5
Ghana (1993)	4.2	4.4	4.9	5.3	4.0	5.1	5.6	4.2	3.7	4.6	5.1	4.4	4.2	4.8	5.4	4.7
Mali	6.7	6.6	7.2	7.5	5.6	7.3	7.2	5.9	4.0	7.0	6.9	6.2	6.8	6.8	7.6	6.9
Niger	7.6	8.2	9.0	9.3	7.1	8.7	8.7	7.2	5.0	8.5	8.6	7.3	7.9	8.8	9.6	8.5
Senegal	6.2	6.2	6.3	6.5	5.2	6.9	6.6	5.2	4.4	6.1	6.5	5.9	6.0	6.4	6.6	6.3
East Africa																
Burundi	4.7	5.2	5.8	5.8	4.4	5.6	5.6	5.1	4.4	5.5	5.7	5.3	5.0	5.6	6.1	5.5
Kenya (1989)	4.3	4.4	5.0	5.5	4.0	5.0	5.6	4.7	3.9	4.7	5.3	4.4	4.1	4.6	5.4	4.8
Kenya (1993)	4.0	3.7	4.1	4.2	3.1	4.1	5.0	3.8	3.2	3.8	4.4	4.0	3.5	3.8	4.3	3.9
Malawi	4.5	4.7	5.6	6.4	U	U	5.5	5.1	4.3	5.2	5.6	4.6	4.7	5.4	6.3	5.3
Rwanda	4.2	4.2	4.5	4.6	3.8	4.4	4.6	4.3	3.7	4.4	4.5	4.0	4.1	4.5	4.6	4.4
Tanzania	5.9	5.8	6.8	7.5	5.7	6.6	7.4	5.9	4.5	6.3	6.9	5.8	5.8	6.4	7.4	6.4
North Africa																
Egypt	2.6	2.7	2.9	3.1	2.6	3.1	3.1	2.9	2.5	2.8	NA	2.4	2.5	2.9	3.4	2.8
Morocco	3.2	3.4	3.9	4.5	3.3	4.3	4.2	3.2	2.8	3.9	3.7	3.2	3.1	3.7	4.8	3.9
Asia																
Bangladesh	2.3	2.4	2.6	2.8	2.3	2.5	2.6	2.5	2.2	2.5	NA	2.2	2.3	2.6	2.9	2.5
Pakistan	4.0	3.9	4.1	4.5	3.7	4.4	4.3	4.0	3.5	4.1	4.3	4.0	3.8	4.0	4.5	4.1

NA = Not applicable
U = Unknown (not available)

Figure 4.1 Mean ideal family size among currently married men and women, Demographic and Health Surveys, 1987-1993



ly married men consistently report a higher mean IFS than monogamously married women. In Niger, for instance, monogamously married men want 4 children more than monogamously married women (11.9 versus 7.2 children). This gap narrows to less than half a child in most countries outside West Africa.

Polygyny is often used to explain men's high fertility desires. This analysis suggests that the reverse may be true, that men are using polygyny to achieve their reproductive goals. In Niger, for example, the total fertility rate (TFR) is 7.3, but monogamous men desire 11.9 children, on average, while polygynous men desire an average of 15.5 children. Thus, it would take 1.6 women per monogamous man and 2.2 women per polygynous man to satisfy their average fertility desires. In Cameroon, with a TFR of 5.8, monogamous men would require 1.7 women and polygynous men 2.8 women to satisfy their expressed fertility desires of 9.8 and 16.1 children, respectively.

Most comparative studies treat sub-Saharan Africa as a homogeneous unit. The results presented here challenge the validity of this assumption. Respondents in West Africa differ from those in East Africa both in their mean ideal family size and in the extent to which men and women share the same fertility desires. The large differences in IFS between men and women in West Africa may have implications for the timing and pace of fertility decline there, particularly if men and women have unequal control over reproductive decisions. Recent trends in Ghana support this argument. The total fertility rate (TFR) in Ghana declined by 14 percent between the two DHS surveys while contraceptive use doubled (GDHS, 1994). During that period, male fertility desires fell by more than 30 percent while women's fertility desires fell by less than 15 percent. In fact, the absolute decline in male fertility desires was three times the decline in female fertility desires. Male methods, especially the condom, accounted almost entirely for the increase in contraceptive use. While these statistics do not conclusively prove a link between declines in male fertility desires and fertility declines, they do suggest that a threshold in fertility decline may be difficult to attain in societies characterized by high fertility desires among men, even if women express very low fertility desires.