

Asia-Pacific
POPULATION & POLICY

December 1988 No. 7

Population Institute 卐 East-West Center

Honolulu, Hawaii

Why Thai Fertility Has Fallen: Are There Lessons for Other Countries?

FERTILITY in Thailand has fallen dramatically in recent years, both in cities and the rural areas, and is approaching levels found in more developed nations. Two-thirds of married Thai women in the childbearing age groups use contraception. A majority of Thai married couples now prefer to have only two children.

The 1987 Demographic and Health Survey estimates that the total fertility rate in Thailand has fallen to 2.4. This statistic means that at current rates of childbearing, the average Thai woman will give birth to only 2.4 children during her lifetime. As recently as the early 1960s Thailand's

total fertility rate was 6.4. So large and rapid a fertility decline is without precedent for a developing nation.

Why has Thailand enjoyed such impressive fertility reduction? According to the authors of *Thailand's Reproductive Revolution: Rapid Fertility Decline in a Third-World Setting*, the country's success results from four major influences over the past two decades:

- Thailand's economy and society have been changing in ways that have raised the cost of having large families.

- Thai culture is relatively conducive to limitation of family size as a means to adjust to these

social and economic changes.

- Even before fertility began to fall rapidly, Thai couples expressed unusually strong interest in limiting family size.

- Since the 1960s, Thailand has sponsored an active and effective national program to provide family planning.

The authors conclude: "It is the interaction between socioeconomic change and an organized program, both operating within a cultural setting conducive to reproductive change in which a latent demand for birth control already existed, that resulted in the rapid and extensive decline of fertility."

Thailand's Success Story

SINCE the 1960s fertility in Thailand has fallen faster and contraceptive use has risen more rapidly than in any other large country, except China and South Korea. While fertility rates have fallen throughout the developing world, Thai fertility has fallen by nearly twice the average rate.

In the early 1960s, Thailand's total fertility rate of 6.4 was typical of large Third World countries, even slightly above average. In other social and economic indicators as well, Thailand was in the middle range of the developing nations. Even today, Thailand not only remains predominantly rural and agricultural but unusually so in comparison to most Third World countries. Unlike other countries that have made the transition from high to low fertility, the vast majority of Thailand's population lives in the rural areas.

Virtually all groups within Thai society have shared in the reproductive revolution. Although differ-

ences in fertility still exist according to such characteristics as education, religion, and income, even poorly educated, low-income rural couples have been full participants in the fertility transition.

A growing number of Thai married couples are practicing birth control. During the 1970s, fertility rates for married couples fell by 40 percent. The proportion of married women of reproductive age using contraception rose from under 15 percent to about 50 percent. These trends have continued in the 1980s. Today, fully two-thirds of married couples use contraception.

Because contraception has become so widely practiced among married couples throughout Thailand, most families today are able to achieve their desired family size. In the 1960s the average Thai woman of childbearing age preferred to have four children, and the average couple raised a family of five or six children. By the 1980s Thai women preferred to have fewer than three children, and the typical Thai family now contains only two or three children.

In the early stages of Thailand's transition from high to low fertility, the nation adopted an official policy of fertility reduction and began a national program to encourage contraception. Such large-scale family planning programs have also been the primary means that other countries have adopted to help curb rapid population growth rates. Over three-fourths of all people in the Third World live in countries that have official policies to reduce population growth rates.

Thailand's family planning program has met with unusual success not only because it is well managed and effective but also because it has operated in a receptive setting. Favorable attitudes toward family limitation, strengthened by continuing economic and social change, have been accompanied by the means to put these attitudes into practice. Dramatically lower fertility is the result.

The Cultural Setting

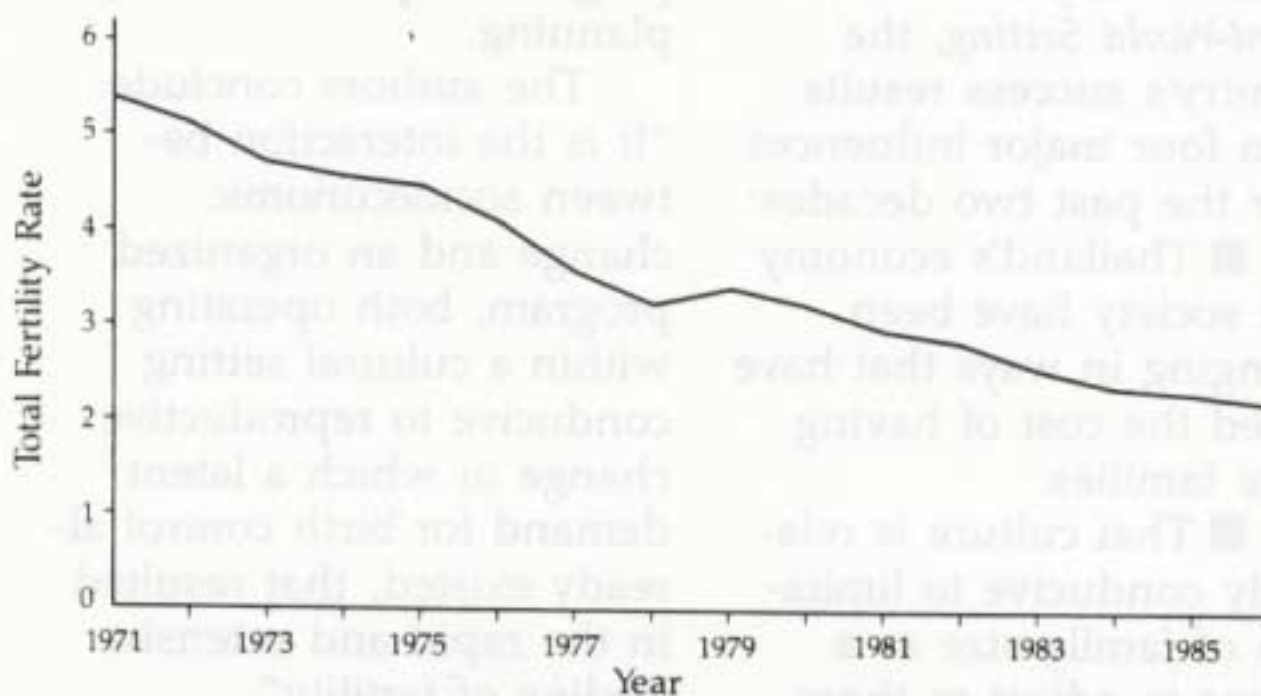
FOR the great majority of Thais, there are neither religious nor cultural obstacles to limiting family size or using contraceptives. The vast majority of Thais share a common language and religion, a fact that has encouraged the diffusion of ideas and the spread of effective services and institutions.

Thailand's population is overwhelmingly Buddhist. Thai Buddhism is associated with an outlook on life that emphasizes individual responsibility. Within Thai culture, couples feel free to make their own decisions about childbearing, rather than conforming to traditional patterns.

Parents and other kin generally agree that reproductive matters are for the couple to decide themselves. Women have relative autonomy and influence over family size and birth control. Thai women are able to

Fertility's Fall

Thailand's Total Fertility Rate, 1971-86



Source: Chayovan, Napaporn, Peerasit Kamnuansilpa, and John Knodel, *Thailand Demographic and Health Survey: 1987*.

Contraceptive Methods

Percentage of married women of ages 15-44 currently practicing specific contraceptive methods, by religion, 1984, Thailand.

Method	Buddhist	Muslim
All methods	66%	34%
Sterilization		
Female	24	5
Male	5	1
Pill	20	11
Condom	2	1
IUD	4	1
Injectables	8	6
Withdrawal	1	6
Other	2	3

Source: Knodel, Chamrathirong, and Debavalya (1987:90).

participate almost as fully as men in social and economic life.

The importance of culture to Thailand's fertility reduction is underscored by the different fertility experience of the Thai Muslim minority population, particularly in the south of the country. This group has been considerably less receptive than the Buddhist majority to the practice of birth control, and their fertility has remained higher, despite the advent of the National Family Planning Program.

Social and Economic Change

IN the modernizing Thai economy, the average couple believe they can no longer afford to raise as large a family as previous generations. Studies of the attitudes of Thai villagers reveal that older and younger generations alike believe that the costs of raising children are much greater than they used to be.

Most Thais believe that education is the main vehicle for upward

social mobility. More Thai couples want an education for their children, as schooling has become more widely available. Rural Thais see education as necessary for their children to obtain more secure and prestigious jobs than agriculture offers. There has been a shift among some Thais from the traditional view that having many children will bring security in old age to the view that having fewer but better educated children will bring more security.

Despite the absence of effective birth control methods in Thailand until the 1960s, surveys of the attitudes of older-generation Thais reveal considerable interest in limiting their family size. Many Thais said they tried unsuccessfully to control fertility by such means as traditional herbal medicines, but they were not aware of effective methods, or lacked access to them.

Thais became interested in family planning not only because of concern for the rising costs of rearing children but also because reductions in infant and child mortality increased the number of surviving children. The mortality declines had the effect of raising family size above traditional levels. In this sense, the social and economic changes that preceded fertility decline in Thailand produced attitudinal changes among the population that set the stage for the introduction of government programs to reduce fertility.

The National Family Planning Program

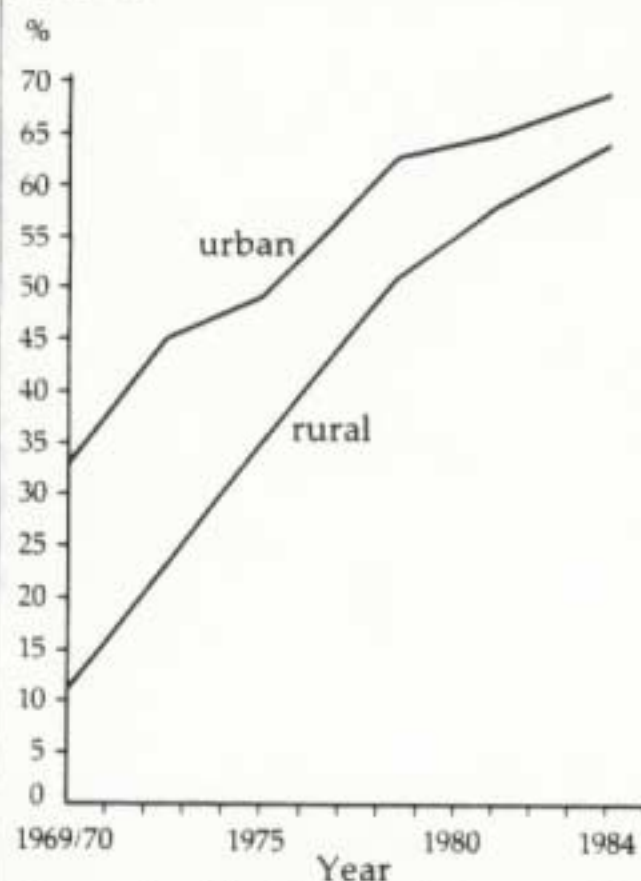
THE onset of the fertility decline in the rural areas of Thailand coincided with the development of the National Family Planning Program in the 1960s. This program has been the major supplier of contraceptive methods to rural Thais.

Because rural Thais were already receptive to the idea of family planning, government efforts to provide couples with contraceptives met with early success, and by 1972, by allowing paramedical personnel to dispense oral contraceptives, the distribution program had effectively spread throughout the entire country. The program not only supplied contraceptive methods, but also played a key role in disseminating information that raised awareness of family planning methods, legitimized people's concern over having large numbers of children, and reinforced their desire for small families.

Without these organized national efforts, it is unlikely that the same widespread and rapid increase in awareness and practice of effective means of birth control would have occurred.

Contraceptive Prevalence

Percentage of currently married Thai women of ages 15-44 practicing contraception, by urban or rural residence, 1969-84



Source: Knodel, Chamrathirong, and Debavalya (1987:85).

Implications

MANY other countries have mounted organized efforts to promote and provide contraception, but most have not been as successful as Thailand. What lessons does Thailand's experience at fertility reduction offer policymakers in other countries?

■ The Importance of Choice

Compared to most other countries in Asia and the Pacific, the Thai family planning program is notable for the full range of modern contraceptive methods it offers. The low cost or free provision of methods to clients, and, in the case of sterilization, the modest subsidies the provider, may have contributed to the program's success.

■ The Importance of Culture

Family planning programs cannot be transferred from one setting

to another without understanding how cultural differences may affect their success. In cultures where female seclusion is the norm, for example, clinic-based programs such as exist in Thailand may stand little chance of success. Family planning must adapt methods and services to the cultural setting.

■ The Importance of Rural Areas

In most countries, fertility falls first and most rapidly among the urban, affluent, and educated population. In Thailand, however, fertility has also fallen impressively among the rural, low-income, and uneducated population. Villagers have increasingly joined the cash economy, transportation networks have improved, and services have been extended to rural areas. Opportunities for education and health care have grown and there has been effective distribution of contracep-

tives through mobile rural health centers. These developments have all contributed to the achievement of lower fertility without a massive move of population into urban areas.

■ The Importance of Family Planning Programs

Thailand's National Family Planning Program has played an important role in speeding national fertility decline, providing hundreds of thousands of people with access to contraceptive services. The program has also helped to increase awareness of the possibility of controlling family size through effective and acceptable means. Without developing a national organization that responds to people's interests and meets their needs, most countries cannot expect to reduce their fertility rates as significantly or rapidly as has Thailand.

Asia-Pacific

POPULATION & POLICY

Asia-Pacific Population & Policy reports research of interest to policymakers and other professionals concerned with population trends, family planning, and development.

Support for this publication is provided by the Office of Population, U.S. Agency for International Development under a cooperative agreement with the Population Institute, East-West Center.

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Further information is contained in *Thailand's Reproductive Revolution: Rapid Fertility Decline in a Third-World Setting*, by John Knodel, Aphichat Chamrathirong, and Nibhon Debavalya. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987.

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ISSN 0891-6683