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The Influence of Gender Role and Women's Empowerment on Couples' Fertility Experiences: A Comprehensive Review

Mashaël Ayesh Bumozah¹, Hawra Ali Abdullah Alawadh², Nasser Ahmed Almutawah³, Asma Hussain Alotaibi⁴, Fatimah Ali Altammar⁴, Myassa Saleah Aldunine⁴, Abeer Yousiff Alrashed⁵, Hoda Nasser Alsultan⁵, Layla Hussain Al Abdulwahab⁵, Maha Ali Abdulmohsen Aleissa⁵, Norah Saleh Aldenaini⁵, Amal Mohammed Sulaimani³, Ruqayyah Baqer Almohammedsaleh⁶, Rahmah Hussain Alabdulwahab⁵, Laila Ali H Almutaayish¹

1. King Fahad Hospital Hufuf
2. King Fahad Hospital-Dental Center
3. PRINCE SAUD BIN JALAWI HOSPITAL
4. Oyun City Hospital
5. Alomran General Hospital
6. KING FAISAL GENERAL HOSPITAL

Abstract

Gender roles and women's empowerment play a pivotal role in shaping couples' fertility experiences, including decision-making, family size, and reproductive health outcomes. Traditional gender norms often place women in subordinate positions, influencing their ability to make autonomous reproductive choices. Women's empowerment—defined as access to education, employment, decision-making power, and healthcare—has emerged as a critical factor for fertility preferences and family planning. This review explores how gender roles and women's empowerment intersect to impact fertility experiences and provides evidence from recent studies on their outcomes.

Introduction

Fertility experiences within couples are significantly influenced by socio-cultural norms, particularly gender roles and the empowerment of women. Gender roles define the expected behaviors of men and women, often placing reproductive responsibilities disproportionately on women (1). Women's empowerment, which encompasses autonomy, education, and decision-making ability, has been shown to influence fertility outcomes, including family size, spacing of births, and contraceptive use (2).

This review aims to highlight the relationship between traditional gender roles, the extent of women's empowerment, and their combined impact on fertility experiences among couples.

The Role of Gender Norms in Fertility

Gender roles in many societies shape fertility patterns by dictating expectations regarding reproduction and family structure. For example:

- **Women's Role as Mothers:** Traditional roles often associate a woman's value with childbearing and caregiving. In many cultures, producing male offspring further solidifies this expectation (3).
- **Male Dominance in Decision-Making:** In patriarchal settings, men often have more influence over decisions regarding family size, contraceptive use, and reproductive health care access (4).
- **Social Pressure for Larger Families:** In some societies, women face societal pressure to have large families, particularly in rural areas where children are seen as economic assets (5).

Recent Studies:

- A study in Sub-Saharan Africa revealed that women who adhered to traditional gender roles had higher fertility rates due to limited access to contraception and decision-making power (6).
- In South Asia, women's subordination to gender norms was linked to higher unmet needs for family planning.

Women's Empowerment and Fertility Experiences

Women's empowerment refers to their ability to make informed decisions, access resources, and participate in their families' social and economic lives. Empowerment dimensions such as education, employment, healthcare access, and autonomy strongly influence fertility outcomes:

• Education:

Women's education is one of the strongest predictors of reduced fertility. Education improves knowledge of family planning and reproductive health, leading to smaller, well-spaced families (6).

A study in Ethiopia showed that women with secondary education had a 30% lower fertility rate compared to those with no education (7,8).

• Employment

Employment provides women with financial independence and increases their negotiating power within households, allowing for greater reproductive autonomy (9).

Employed women are more likely to delay childbirth and adopt family planning methods (10).

• Healthcare Autonomy:

Empowered women are more likely to seek healthcare services, including prenatal care, family planning, and contraception.

In a 2020 study in Bangladesh, women with autonomy in healthcare decisions were twice as likely to use modern contraceptives (11).

Participation in Decision-Making:

Women's ability to participate in fertility-related decisions leads to better outcomes, such as lower fertility rates and improved maternal health.

A study in India found that women involved in household decision-making had significantly lower fertility rates than those excluded (12).

The Interplay Between Gender Roles and Women's Empowerment

The relationship between gender roles and women's empowerment is complex. Societies with entrenched gender norms often hinder efforts to empower women, thereby influencing fertility experiences. For example:

- **Reproductive Autonomy:** In societies where men control reproductive decisions, women's fertility preferences often align with cultural expectations rather than personal choice (13)
- **Contraceptive Use:** Women with limited empowerment may lack the ability to negotiate contraceptive use, leading to unintended pregnancies.

Case Study Example:

In Nigeria, a study demonstrated that women in egalitarian marriages, where men supported shared decision-making, experienced greater reproductive autonomy, resulting in improved use of family planning and smaller family sizes.

Challenges to Women's Empowerment in Fertility Decisions

- **Cultural and Religious Barriers:** Cultural norms and religious beliefs often prioritize male dominance and traditional family structures, limiting women's empowerment.
- **Lack of Education and Resources:** Low educational attainment and economic dependency restrict women's reproductive choices.
- **Healthcare Inequities:** Limited access to reproductive healthcare, especially in rural areas, undermines women's ability to control fertility outcome.

Promoting Women's Empowerment to Improve Fertility Outcomes

Empowering women requires multi-faceted approaches that address education, employment, healthcare, and cultural barriers. Effective interventions include:

- **Improving Access to Education:** Girls' education must be prioritized to delay marriage and childbirth.

- **Strengthening Reproductive Health Services:** Providing accessible, high-quality family planning services ensures women can make informed choices.
- **Promoting Male Involvement:** Programs that engage men to support shared fertility decisions have proven effective [19] .

Conclusion

The interplay between gender roles and women's empowerment profoundly impacts couples' fertility experiences. Traditional gender norms often limit women's reproductive autonomy, while empowerment through education, employment, and decision-making significantly improves fertility outcomes. Addressing cultural and systemic barriers and promoting empowerment strategies are essential for fostering gender equality and enhancing reproductive health. Future policies should focus on empowering women to make informed fertility decisions while promoting shared decision-making among couples.

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