

Population & Societies

Adolescent fertility is declining worldwide

Gilles Pison *

The media focus on adolescent fertility and the public debate on this issue would suggest that its frequency is increasing. In fact, the number of births to very young mothers is actually falling across the world. After describing the current situation, Gilles Pison explains the reason for this decline.

According to the United Nations, a total of 135 million children were born in 2010, of whom 12% (16 million) were born to a mother aged below 20 [1]. In relation to the total female population in this age group, this corresponds to a fertility rate of 54 births per 1,000 women aged 15-19, versus 64 per 1,000 in 2000, so the trend is downward. Where is early childbearing most prevalent? Why is this the case? What is the explanation for the downward trend?

A hundredfold variation in adolescent fertility

There is an almost hundredfold variation in fertility rates at ages 15-19 across different countries. It is lowest in Libya (3 births per year per 1,000 women aged 15-19 in 2005-2010) and highest in the Democratic Republic of Congo (201 births per 1,000) (Figure 1).

The incidence of adolescent fertility is generally high in sub-Saharan Africa (Figure 2A). It is also high, but less so, in Latin America, South Asia (India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan), in parts of the Middle East, in Russia and Eastern Europe. It is low, by comparison, in China, Australia, in Europe (except eastern Europe), North America (except the United States) and in North Africa (except Egypt).

It tends to be high in countries where overall fertility, between ages 15 and 49, is also high, but the correlation

is only partial. Focusing on countries where overall fertility is low (2 children per woman or less on average), adolescent fertility is high in some industrialized countries (United Kingdom, United States, Russia) and low in others (Japan, Netherlands); it is high in some developing countries (Brazil, Dominican Republic) and low in others (Libya, Tunisia, China). So apart from sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, the separation between countries with high and low adolescent fertility is not a clearcut divide between developed and developing countries.

Figure 1. Fertility of women aged 15-19 in a selection of countries (2005-2010)

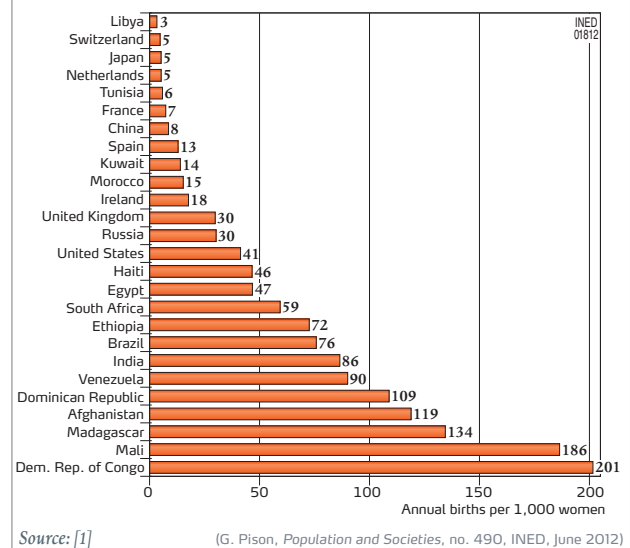


Figure 2A. Fertility of women aged 15-19
(annual number of births per 1,000 women) (2005-2009)

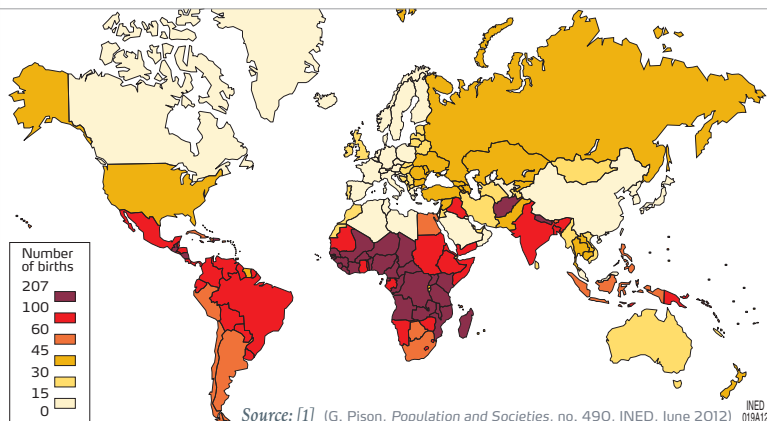
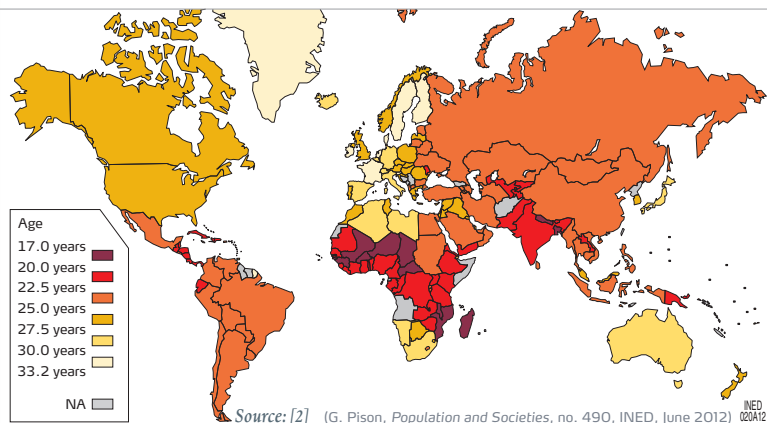


Figure 2B. Female median age* at first marriage or union
(circa 2000)



* age at which 50% are still single.

Early marriage, the first factor of early childbearing

The factor most closely associated with variations in early childbearing is women's age at marriage. "Marriage" here is taken in the broadest sense and includes consensual unions in countries where marriage is not, or is no longer, the norm. The map in Figure 2B shows the variations in median age at first marriage or first union, i.e. the age at which half of a given birth cohort is already married or with a partner [2]. Adolescent fertility is high in countries where women marry young, and low in countries where first marriage is delayed.

Age at first marriage is increasing practically everywhere. In Africa, for example, in the 1960s, median age at first marriage was below 18 years in most countries except in southern Africa. Forty years later, in the early 2000s it had risen to above 19.5 years in most countries. It is above 25 years in northern and southern Africa, and between 19 and 22 years in other regions of the continent (Figure 2B). It is in the landlocked Sahel countries of western Africa (Mali, Niger, Chad) that it remains lowest, but here too it is increasing.

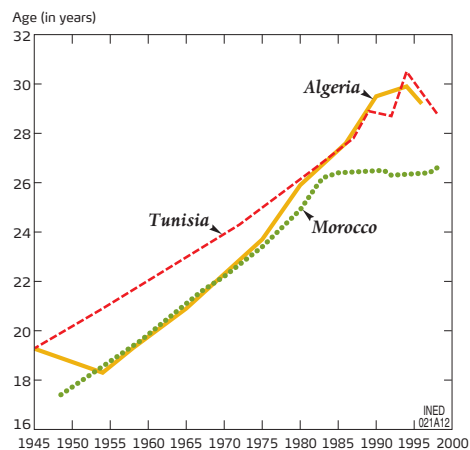
When age at marriage increases in a country, early childbearing generally decreases. The Maghreb countries are a good example of this. The school enrolment of girls, the increase in female labour force participation and improvements in women's status in the family and in society have led to an increase of more than ten years in women's age at marriage since the Second World War, with a rise from 17-19 years on average to almost 27 years in Morocco and 30 years in Algeria and Tunisia [3] (figure 3). As sexual intercourse before marriage is strongly condemned, for women especially, sexual debut often occurs at the time of marriage, so the delay in marriage has thus produced a mechanical decrease in early childbearing.

More first births outside marriage

In countries that are more tolerant of non-marital sexuality, the increase in age at marriage is often associated with a rise in premarital pregnancies. This does not mean that teenage births are increasing, or that girls are becoming sexually active at a younger age. As the age at marriage is steadily shifting towards later ages, premarital births now include births which, at the same age, had previously taken place

within marriage. The increase in premarital fertility is often seen as a problem in southern countries, not because of health risks to the mother and child (linked to the mother's age), but rather because unmarried

Figure 3. Increase in female age at first marriage in the Maghreb region



Source: [3]

(G. Pison, *Population and Societies*, no. 490, INED, June 2012)

mothers and their children are widely stigmatized in societies where tolerance of extra-marital sexuality is low.

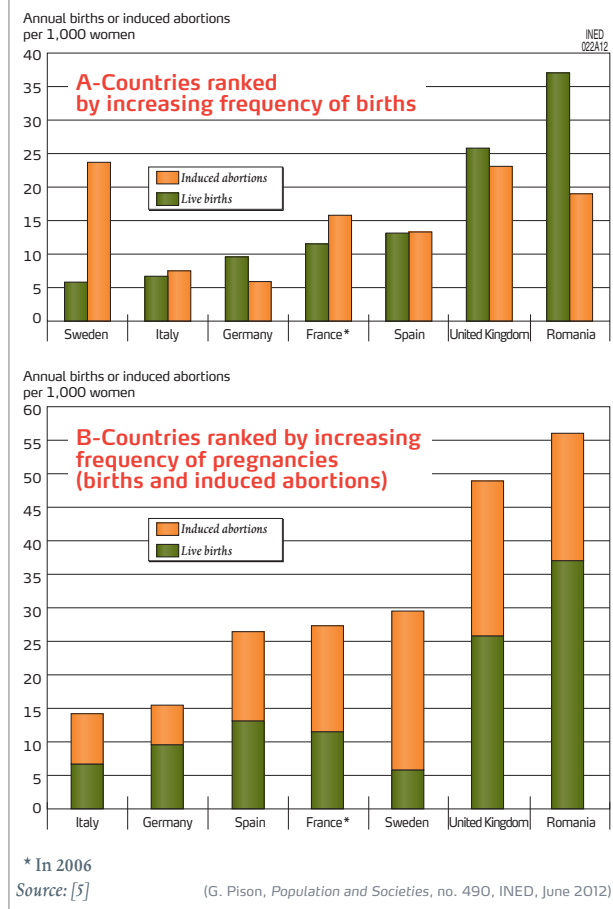
Sooner or later, the increase in non-marital births produces a change in mentalities, as is currently the case in Europe. The countries of northern Europe were pioneers in this respect. For several decades now, couples have no longer felt obliged to marry if the women becomes pregnant, and they no longer wait until they are married before starting a family. Since 1990, more than 40% of all births have been to unmarried parents. Likewise, when a couple marries, it is not for the sake of the children, but rather to publicly celebrate their union. The very meaning of marriage has changed, and it is now disconnected from notions of sexuality or children [4]. No distinction is made between legitimate and illegitimate children, and the very concept of "illegitimacy" has disappeared. A steady relationship and cohabitation are now the markers of entry into conjugal life. But union formation is now increasingly delayed, as is marriage in countries where this form of union remains the norm. Moreover, the interval between entry into union and birth of the first child is increasing, as the younger generations prefer to be well-established in life, with qualifications, a job and a home of their own before starting a family. These factors have led to a decline in early childbearing.

The same is true in other regions of the world, but paradoxically, in some part of the world – such as Latin America – social concerns and moral panic about non-marital pregnancies and births are increasing despite the decline in teenage births.

Variable incidence of adolescent fertility across Northern countries

While adolescent fertility is less frequent than in the past, it has by no means disappeared, notably in Northern countries. To understand variations across countries, it is useful to examine in parallel the variations in frequency of induced abortions. Detailed statistics are available since abortion is legal in these countries. Figure 4 shows the situation in seven European countries [5]. They are ranked by increasing frequency of adolescent fertility in 2008 (Figure 4A). Such births are least frequent in Sweden (6 births per year per 1,000 women aged 15-19) and most frequent in Romania (37 births per 1,000 women). The three countries with the lowest adolescent fertility (Sweden, Italy, Germany) reveal differing profiles if we look at the total number of pregnancies, including those that end in abortion (Figure 4B). In Sweden, teenage pregnancies are quite common, but most are terminated (4 in 5). In Italy and

Figure 4. Births and induced abortions at ages 15-19 in selected European countries, 2008



Germany, they are less common but less frequently end in abortion (one-third of cases in Germany and half in Italy). The United Kingdom and Romania are at the other end of the scale. In these two countries, teenage pregnancies are much more frequent – four times more so than in Italy and Germany – and only a minority of girls abort (one-third in Romania and almost half in the UK). The adolescent fertility rate is thus 4-6 times higher than in Sweden, for a similar or lower abortion rate.

Among industrialized countries, the Anglo-Saxon countries – the United Kingdom, Ireland and especially the United States – have an exceptionally high incidence of adolescent fertility, and teenage pregnancies are viewed as a major social problem. They are particularly common among disadvantaged groups, partly because of inadequate contraception and (in the US and Ireland) difficulties in accessing abortion services, but also because, for certain marginalized young girls, motherhood provides status and social recognition. An effective way to reduce the frequency of adolescent fertility in these countries would be to provide greater educational and social opportunities to girls from disadvantaged backgrounds.

France is in a medium position in Europe, for both early childbearing, which is falling slightly, and for early

abortions whose numbers are stable. More and more girls who become pregnant now opt for abortion [6], and the situation in France is moving close to that of Sweden in this respect.

A four-fold decrease in adolescent fertility over the last 40 years in France

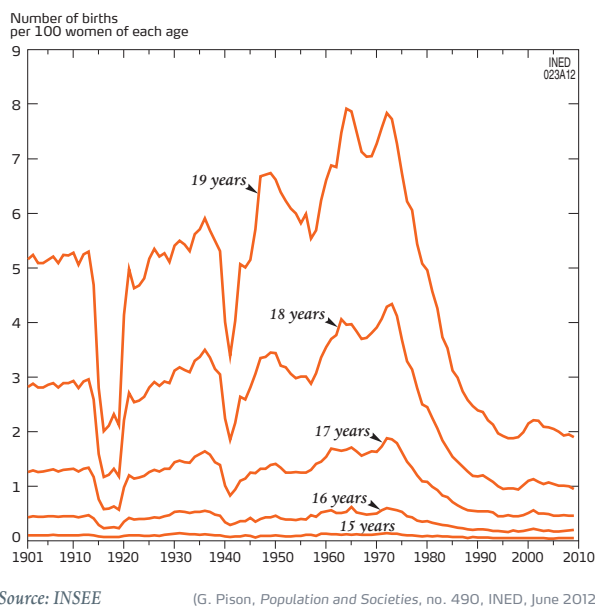
If we look at the frequency of early childbearing in France today in relation to long term trends since 1901, two different periods emerge. The first period covers the first three-quarters of the twentieth century. The fertility rates at age 19, age 18 etc. increase steadily, notably after 1945, with temporary interruptions during the two World Wars (Figure 5). This increase is due to a lowering of the age at marriage and a more relaxed attitude to sexuality which led to a growing number of pre-nuptial conceptions [4]. Contraception was not yet widely available, and difficult to obtain, notably for young people who were not expected to have sexual relations before marriage. Abortion was illegal at that time, and extra-marital births were frowned upon, so there were numerous "shotgun marriages" to legitimize future births. Age at marriage decreased as a result.

A second period of rapid decline in early childbearing began in 1973. For example, the fertility rate at age 19 fell four-fold in 25 years, from 78 births per 1,000 women in 1972 to just 19 in 1997. This was a direct consequence of the French laws which successively legalized contraception (Neuwirth Act passed on 28 December 1967, but implemented between 1969 and 1972) and abortion (Veil Act of 17 January 1975). First births are now increasingly desired and planned, often taking place after completing education and establishing a stable relationship.

Early childbearing stopped falling in the mid 1990s, when women's age at completing education also levelled off. Fertility rose slightly again in the late 1990s, but among all age groups. The teenage pregnancy rate has remained stable ever since, and has even fallen slightly. The abortion rate is also stable, as mentioned earlier.

Early childbearing is decreasing across most of the world, reflecting the increase in female school enrolment and labour force participation, the improvement in women's status and new aspirations among the younger generations. In the past, most very young women who gave birth were married, where today this is no longer the case. While early childbearing among married women has never posed a problem, teenage pregnancies are much less well accepted by today's societies. The health and welfare services are far from providing young

Figure 5. Frequency of adolescent fertility in France since 1901



women with the means to express their sexuality while respecting their fertility choices. Both in Northern and Southern countries, the gap between mentalities and behaviours is still very wide.

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ABSTRACT

In 2010, there were 54 births per 1,000 women aged 15-19 in the world, 16% fewer than in 2000. The decline in early childbearing is associated with women's later marriage or entry into union, in turn a consequence of increased female school enrolment and women's enhanced status in society. In France, after increasing during the first three-quarters of the twentieth century as attitudes to sexuality became more relaxed, the 1970s and 1980s saw a four-fold decrease in the frequency of early childbearing thanks to the legalization of contraception and abortion.