

Surprising results in a new study on childbearing and education

July 4 2011

In almost every country, women with more education have fewer children. But does education reduce childbearing, or does childbearing get in the way of education, or both? New research by Joel E. Cohen and colleagues in Norway found that, at least among a population of Norwegian women, childbearing impeded education more than education impeded childbearing. The surprising findings are reported online this week in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

"These results suggest that women with advanced degrees have lower completed fertility on the average principally because women who have one or more children early are more likely to leave or not enter long educational tracks and never attain a high educational level," says Cohen, who is the Abby Rockefeller Mauzé Professor and head of the Laboratory of Populations at Rockefeller University and at Columbia University's Earth Institute.

Cohen and his co-authors, Øystein Kravdal and Nico Keilman from the University of Oslo, followed all the women born in Norway in 1964 through the end of their childbearing, using year-by-year data on [education](#), enrollment and reproduction.

"We did this study in [Norway](#) because that's where we could get such beautiful data, not because that's where there's a big problem," Cohen says.

The researchers expected to find that women around 40 years old with

more education bear fewer children mainly because education reduces childbearing. However, they found the opposite: women who have children early seem not to go on to higher education, much more than higher education reduces childbearing. "That's the main contribution of our paper," co-author Kravdal says. "We quantified the relative importance of fertility for education and vice versa."

Cohen and his colleagues offer several possible policy implications based on their findings. For example, should women be discouraged from bearing children at an early age? The authors suggest that policy makers could recognize that early childbearing may be a result of decisions made by well-informed individuals. On the other hand, if society places a large value on education that is inadequately taken into account through individuals' decision making, policies could be adopted that discourage people from having [children](#) at an early age.

In addition, if women underestimate how much childbearing interferes with further education — along with potentially adverse consequences for their long-term quality of life — then a case could be made that it would be a good idea to create more awareness about the educational consequences of early childbearing.

Finally, a policy could be implemented that offset the effect of [childbearing](#) on education by, for example, lowering the cost of child care for students who are mothers. Such a policy, the authors say, could in principle make more [women](#) interested in having a child early; however, it would increase the educational levels for those who would have a child (whether wanted or not) while they are still young, with potentially beneficial effects also on others' well-being.

"We discussed the policy implications at length, but with hesitation because more and better analyses need to be done, especially in developing countries," says Cohen.

More information: "Childbearing impeded education more than education impeded childbearing among Norwegian women," by Joel Cohen, Øystein Kravdal, and Nico Keilman, *PNAS*.

Provided by Rockefeller University

Citation: Surprising results in a new study on childbearing and education (2011, July 4) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-07-results-childbearing.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.