

For highly educated women, families are an increasingly popular option

May 15 2012

An increasing number of highly educated women are opting for families, according to a national study co-authored by a University at Buffalo economist.

Qingyan Shang, an assistant professor at UB, says the study uncovers what may be the reversal of a trend by highly educated women.

She says it is still too early to be certain, but the research clearly shows fertility rising for older, highly educated women since the 1990s.

(Fertility is defined as the number of children a woman has had.)

Childlessness also declined by roughly 5 percentage points between 1998 and 2008.

"Women born in the late 1950s are the turning point," said Shang.

Members of this group initially showed low fertility. But Shang said fertility increased for those members in their late 30s and early 40s.

The paper, co-authored by Bruce A. Weinberg, professor of economics at Ohio State University, appears online in the *Journal of Population Economics* and will be published in a forthcoming print edition.

Shang said two previous studies which examined fertility among highly educated women had limitations and came to conflicting conclusions.

One study focused only on women in their late 20s. Another study

examined fertility for women in managerial positions.

Using a sample of professional women makes the results difficult to interpret because women who have more children may switch to other occupations, according to Shang.

"We did a more comprehensive study," said Shang. "We instead define the sample using education, which is less responsive to short-term fertility decisions."

The conclusions are derived from data gathered by the June Current Population Survey, compiled by the U.S. [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) and U.S. [Census Bureau](#). The researchers also used the Vital Statistics Birth Data from the National Center for Health Statistics as a second data set.

While the research did not directly address what factors might be contributing to the fertility increase, "We did list some possible explanations based on previous research," said Shang.

Shang mentioned the idea of "the learning story," where the decisions of previous generations inform later decisions by subsequent generations. There has also been an increased supply of personal services that have reduced childcare expenses. Other research shows men may be taking more responsibility for child care.

Shang and Weinberg also could not determine whether women are opting for families instead of their careers or in addition to their careers.

"We know these women are opting for families," said Shang. "We don't know if they in turn are opting out of the labor market."

The researchers discovered an increase in multiple birth rates around 1990, suggesting fertility treatments may have played a role.

"The data does not include information about whether women used fertility treatment," Shang said. "But we use the trends in plural birth rates to impute the share of the increase in fertility among highly educated women that is attributed to fertility treatment."

Shang said the study shows that fertility would have increased even in the absence of fertility treatments.

Provided by University at Buffalo

Citation: For highly educated women, families are an increasingly popular option (2012, May 15) retrieved 7 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-05-highly-women-families-increasingly-popular.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.