

Preferred length of birth intervals in Zambia: Exploring the determinants

Introduction

Very few studies have investigated the various aspects of spacing or birth intervals in Sub-Saharan Africa. The objective of this study is to investigate the effect of a few selected factors on preferred duration for child spacing or birth interval among low income households in Zambia..

Background:

With modernization, spouses begin to discuss their preference for the next child as well as the timing of the birth. When there is either agreement or disagreement it is assumed that the factors that lead to disagreement are the same. Understandably, gender influences on couple decision making shapes the preferences for length of birth intervals among husbands and wives. It is therefore necessary to examine the process of decision making with respect to child spacing separately, and jointly among husbands and wives.

Perspective on birth spacing decision making :

The social influence theory suggests that preferences with respect to the length of the birth interval may be influenced by advice people receive from significant others. Those who receive advice are more likely to prefer longer birth intervals than those who do not. In addition, when individuals in primary relationships enter into discussion with respect to length of birth interval as well as spacing methods, they are more likely to make rational choices with respect to the length of the birth interval. (Kim, Kols and Mucheke; 1998).

Methods and material

Sample: Two urban neighborhoods from the City of Kitwe in the Copperbelt region in Zambia were randomly chosen. One hundred and sixty five households were randomly selected at the research site. Questionnaires were administered separately to the husband and wife. All the households in which either the husband or wife had completed questionnaires are included in this particular study

Variables: We selected four concepts (independent variables); discussed interval length with partner, discussed method to achieve preferred interval, received advice about desirable birth interval, and the type of fertility control method ever used; related to birth intervals based on the social influence perspective. Categorical variables related to the four concepts were constructed.

Analysis: We analyzed husbands and wives' responses separately. Even though about 82 percent of wives received advice about how to space their children, far fewer percent of wives said that they discussed spacing methods (see Hwintmd) with their husbands. About 32 percent of the husband said that they have discussed spacing methods with their wives, while only half that percentage of wives, about 16 percent, said that they discussed spacing methods with their husbands. Thus there is a noticeable gap between wives and husbands with respect to their statements on discussion of methods for spacing.

The dependent variable is length of preferred birth interval (The variable 'Bestint' and 'bestinth' measure the preferred length of birth interval reported by husband and wife respectively. The variables were recoded into three ordinal categories of preferred intervals: less than one year; one to two years and more than three years). We used ordinal logistic regression (under proportional odds assumption) to examine the effects of selected variables on length of birth interval. Husbands who used traditional methods were more likely to belong to shorter preferred birth intervals than longer. However, among wives, the variable Advmeth (received advice on child spacing methods) had a significant effect on likelihood of preference for birth interval 1 to 2 years. The odds of belonging to the group of wives who prefer long intervals increases for those who have received advice with respect to child spacing. The odds is about 2.8 times that among those who have not received any advice. There is a significant difference between husbands and wives with respect to the factors that influence the preferences for length of birth intervals. Since prior use of birth control method has a significant effect on the preferred length of birth interval among husbands, we explored the association between two. In order to further assess the relationship between birth control methods and the preference for length of birth intervals, we examined the association using correspondence analysis. The correlation between method use and preferred length of birth interval among husbands appeared to be weak.

We had followed up all structured questions on child spacing in the Kitwe survey with semi-structured questions. The qualitative responses to the questions are analysed using content analysis. The following are finding from the qualitative study. The most important reason for spacing among mothers was to ensure health growth of their last child. Husbands were in general more concerned about the health of the child than with the health of the mother. Several terms such as 'growth', 'health' and 'breast feeding' were used well over a hundred times during the qualitative interview with the husbands.

While about 28 percent of the husbands reported that they received some form of advise about spacing methods, only about 16 percent of the wives said that they received advise from out side about spacing methods. Nearly 90 percent of the husbands preferred to seek advice from medical facilities while the rest mentioned the 'elders' as a source of information. Wives said that they discussed modern methods much like their husbands. However, surprisingly, a number of women indicated that their husbands disagreed with them about the use of modern methods for child spacing.

Conclusion: We examined the effect of four selected determinants of preferred birth intervals in Zambia. The ordinary logistic regression analysis was done separately for husbands and wives. We found that the determinants influencing preferred birth intervals are not the same for husband and wives. Wives who received advice on spacing methods were more likely to prefer 1 to 2 years of birth interval than those who did not receive advice. However, among husbands, only prior use of contraception influenced the length of preferred birth intervals. While the family planning programs in Zambia which focus on improving knowledge of spacing methods may benefit men, the use of spacing methods may be improved through more intensive involvement of women's agencies and groups.