Falling birth rate causes problems

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The total fertility rate in Taiwan is decreasing annually, and on average the number of women planning to give birth to less than two babies during her reproductive years is rapidly on the rise. Compared with other countries, this is lower than expected. The Department of Health plans to spend more than NT$84 million on health education to encourage women of child-bearing age to have more babies.

According to a survey, the "five no's policy" ? no marriage, no birth, no nurturing, no life, and no prospects ? has become new generation’s values. If such socially problematic values aren't reversed, the number of single people will increase greatly, and there will be more and more unmarried people and widows and widowers in Taiwan's society. Those who are married, meanwhile, are likely to be "DINKs," which stands for dual income no kids. In other words, as the economy grows, average income increases, and women's participation in the labor market rises, the traditional belief that it is a "social responsibility" to get married and have children is replaced by "economics."

Economics is the study of selecting the optimal objective from limited resources. Therefore, from an economic perspective, the following three conditions must be met to observe fertility behavior:

1. Objective: a child must give parents a sense of satisfaction.

2. Method: parents have choices regarding whether to have a child and the number of children in their family.

3. Limited resources: bearing and raising a child take a substantial amount of resources.

A child can provide parents with a sense of satisfaction in at least one of the following three ways. First, the love that a child gives directly satisfies parents. As well, a child is himself or herself an asset; for example, he or she can help parents manage a family business, cultivate agriculture land, etc. Therefore, income, productivity and service carried out by children indirectly satisfies parents. Lastly, a child serves as a social, spiritual and economic assurance to aging parents, and thus indirectly makes parents feel satisfied.

The second condition is whether a couple can choose to have a child, the number of children to have and when to reproduce. In the past, some tactics used to control a couple's fertility selection rights included infanticide and abortion. Now, there are more advanced and easy contraceptive methods on the market. Moreover, modern medicine also gives infertile couples a greater possibility of conceiving a child. Therefore, knowledge and application of contraception are regarded as important factors in fertility decision making.
Such decisions are influenced by the type and quantity of work that people in different age groups perform in the market place. Also, a child’s individual characteristics can also affect parents’ decisions on future fertility and the number of children they will have.

Regarding limited resources, bearing and raising a child requires parents to expend large amounts of time and money. According to a consumer spending survey, the total cost to raise a male child to his 22nd birthday for a dual income family is about 21 percent of total income. This is high compared to 13.5 percent of total income spent on transportation, 7 percent on healthcare, and 4.2 percent on clothes. According to US research, well-educated women expect to spend 487.1 hours per year to care for a child from age zero to 2.9, and 364.9 hours for a child from age three to 4.9. If calculating this based on a businesswoman’s wage, the “time cost” (時間價值) to take care of a child is quite high.

According to survey data in Taiwan, an increase in family income and fall in the number of children born may seem to indicate that children are seen as a low value commodity.

In fact, when family income increases, parental demands and investment in their children also increase; a wealthy family emphasizes quality rather than quantity when raising a child. Thus, even though a child is not regarded as a low value commodity, family size decreases in relation to a family’s wealth while per child expenditures increase.

Also, as a woman’s education level increases, the number of children they will have decreases, and the difference between the number of children they plan to have versus the actual number narrows.

The negative correlation between education level and fertility is a result of income disparities between well-educated and less-educated women. Furthermore, well-educated women have a better understanding of the process of giving birth and contraception, and by applying such knowledge the number of children they expect to have more closely matches the actual figure, as accidental pregnancies are prevented.

Additionally, an increased infant mortality rate (IMR) can cause fertility to rise. This is more true for older women than younger women. An increase in the IMR doesn’t cause young women’s birth rates to rise because they generally believe there is still plenty of procreative time remaining. Good healthcare and sanitation in Taiwan has lowered both the IMR and the birth rate.

To summarize, it should be a positive trend to see that a decrease in Taiwan’s birth rate is due to increased income and education levels, and a decrease in the IMR. If a wealthy and well-educated couple choose to have a baby in a more developed country because of a lack of prospects in Taiwan, and if an increase in Taiwan’s total fertility rate is led by immigrant women or “spring-autumn romances” (老少配, couples with a significant age difference), however, this will lead to structural problems in society which deserve more attention.

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