
Fertility in Cuba: Fewer Diapers to Wash

28/09/2017



Although most Cuban women do not give up the idea of being mothers, having or not children and the precise moment to start the descent path is a couple's right, and even a decision that in some cases extends to relatives.

To assimilate a society with small families seems to be an irreversible reality in this country, where after the demographic boom of the 1960s worldwide, there was a decline in fertility, considered by experts as more accelerated in Latin America and the Caribbean.

In Cuba, low birth rates have a multi-causal origin, explained to Prensa Latina, Dr. Grisell Rodríguez Gómez, a researcher at the Center for Demographic Studies (Cedem) at the University of Havana.

Gomez cited current sexual and reproductive rights in Cuba, such as easy access to contraception and legal abortion in safe conditions in health institutions; the active incorporation of women into social and work life, external migration and the ability to define priorities.

The reality is that Cuban women have not covered the level of population replacement since 1978, which is why this situation has been going on for several decades. That means, women do have at least one daughter during their reproductive life, according to the academician.

In the book "The population of Cuba today", its authors, Doctors Rodríguez Gómez and Juan Carlos Albizu-Campos Espiñeira, point out that although external migration and fertility are and will be two deciding variables in the near future of the Cuban demographic dynamics, the aging population will also be demanding important attention in terms of action or policy.

By the end of 2015, 19.4 percent of the Cuban people were 60 or older, according to official data, and the trend is to continue to rise. Meanwhile, 2,153 grandparents had reached 100 or more years by that date.

In this scenario women stand out with a longer life expectancy, but they are also a majority within the group of the aging population that cares for other elders. "We live in an aging society with fewer births and that is not going to change," said Gómez.

For most demographers, it is a mistake to describe the issue of low fertility as a problem, goal or issue that concerns only women.

This is a criterion assumed by the doctor in Demography Marisol Alfonso de Armas, who thinks that having children should be a decision of two.

Alfonso de Armas, also national official for the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) explained during a workshop on Fertility in Cuba held at the José Martí International Institute of Journalism in Havana that the care for children and respect for mother's space to study and work is a shared responsibility.

Dr. Gómez stated in her talk at the workshop that fertility must be analyzed here as a derivation of public policies promoted by the government since the triumph of the Revolution in 1959, in interaction with economic conditions of the country.

Although motherhood is very important for Cuban women and the majority aspires and wishes to be a mother some time, several young women mentioned to Prensa Latina the lack of an own house or insufficient space where they reside, low wages to meet the basic needs of a child and personal aspirations as some of the reasons why they do not fulfill that desire or postpone it.

Young women also mentioned other factors such as the uncertainty caused by not having the guarantee of a vacancy in existing nurseries (designed for the care of the children of the working women), as well as the lack of money to pay the high wages demanded by private child minders.

Even though the government approved last year new guidelines to stimulate fertility, these are insufficient. Hence, experts in this phenomenon agree on the importance of reviewing these policies, and note that although they might look attractive, they will not change the trend maintained during the last four decades.

This phenomenon occurs despite the guarantees offered by the Ministry of Public Health for women before, during and after pregnancy, and the increasing care for the infertile couple. To this end, the assisted reproduction is provided free of charge in several hospitals in the country. This is a right of the couple, even if it is not definitive factor in the increase of the fecundity.

Another worrying factor is the fact that adolescent fertility in Cuba represented 15.2 percent of the total in 2015 and that 14.6 percent of those who became mothers that year were less than 20 years old.

According to Grisell Rodríguez, these levels do not correspond to the actions promoted in the country in the field of health.

Research published in the journal *Novedades en Población*, by Cedom, indicate that the fertility of the 15-19 year group had a slight decrease in the period 2010-2014. However, the 10-15 years group has increased its level, while urban fertility gains prominence.

In an informal conversation with adolescents from the capital, Prensa Latina learnt lack of communication between parents and teenagers about sex education, ignorance and lack of systematic treatment of this content in schools, and the irresponsibility of young people are among the main causes that favor unwanted pregnancies.

The beginning of sexual intercourse at younger ages, around the age of 15, and the inadequate use of contraceptive methods were other factors mentioned by the teenagers. Hence the solution to an unwanted pregnancy is abortion, a method also used erroneously by adults as a contraceptive alternative.

Their responses coincide with the results of the 2009 National Fertility Survey, the second conducted in the country, which showed that 30 percent of young men and women had their first relationship without any protection.

Although adolescent fertility rate in Cuba is below that registered in most Latin American and Caribbean countries, the Government works with other key organizations and institutions to reduce this indicator, including the Ministry of

Education, the National Center for Sexual Education and the National Program for Maternal and Child Care.
