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John Neagle

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Brazil: Notes On Causes Of Declining Fertility

by John Neagle

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Brazil's fertility rate dropped from 5.75 children per woman in 1970 to 3.2 today. Demographers estimate a total population of 170 million by 2000, 50 million less than predicted a decade ago. The relatively sudden fertility reduction is attributed to several factors, e.g., greater availability of birth control pills, 10 years of economic stagnation and nearly universal access to television.

George Martinez, a Canadian demographer who works in Brasilia, told the New York Times: "What distinguishes Brazil is the absence of any government birth control policy. Brazil has experienced the largest self-induced drop in human history." After initial hostility to family planning in the 1960s, the government and the Roman Catholic Church in Brazil have effectively maintained relative silence on the subject in recent years. In 1965, the military regime encouraged large families, and only 5% of married women of child-bearing age used contraceptives. According to Bemfram, Brazil's largest private family planning agency, at present two-thirds of married women use some form of contraception. The two most popular methods are contraceptive pills and sterilization. Surveys indicate that about 93% of women who use birth control pills buy them over the counter without a prescription. According to the New York Times, about 27% of married Brazilian women have been sterilized, compared to 17% in the US. Of married men in Brazil, only 0.8% have undergone sterilization. An estimated three million Brazilian women resort each year to illegal abortions. In the 1980s, Brazil's per capita income remained largely stagnant. Living standards for at least a third of the population can be described as abysmal. About 300,000 babies die every year before their first birthday. Many social scientists say they believe that television, and particularly soap operas, is responsible in part for declining fertility. In a recent issue of Ciencia Hoje, a Brazilian scientific monthly, Martinez wrote: "Television transmits images, attitudes, values and habits of a modern urban, industrial and middle-class Brazil. They are images of the small, affluent, consumer-oriented family, of a divorce between sexuality and procreation." A clause in Brazil's 1988 Constitution that stipulates four-month maternity leaves has prompted some employers to demand that young women seeking jobs show certificates of sterility. Last month, workers at a lingerie factory where women were forced to undergo regular urine tests went on strike. Women found to be pregnant were dismissed, the strikers said. (Basic data from New York Times, 08/08/89)

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