

Education and the Rising Reproductive Cost of Maintaining Status

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Education leads to postponed and reduced fertility. Education has been found to be associated with later onset of childbearing and lower fertility outcomes around the world (Blossfeld and De Rose 1992; Billari and Piccarreta 200, Kennedy 2004, Jejeebhoy 1995, Konogolo 1985). Education depresses fertility preferences, raises contraceptive use, increases opportunity costs and female autonomy, and helps focus childbearing into the realm of rational decision-making. Studies based on natural experiments and monozygotic twins suggest that school leaving age is causally related to later and lower fertility (Skirbekk et al. 2004, Fort 2005, Christensen et al. 2008).

Education is increasingly important for social status. Striving for social status may be a basic human behaviour, and education has become one of the most common and important status identifiers. One's relative education matters much more than absolute education; it raises life satisfaction, happiness and self-esteem (Clark and Oswald 1996, Solnick and Hemenway 1998). Historically, one's status destination, often known at young ages (as inherited wealth, land and inheritance) often decided one's status outcome. Formal schooling levels were low and women could be relatively highly educated but still graduate before the onset of her reproductive period. With growing education, one needs an increasing number of years in society to have relatively high schooling. Education becomes more important for status, income, occupation, and in terms of attracting a partner (Smits et al. 2000). With growth in education, the time to attain status rises. With increased social mobility, fertility is strongly depressed for those who attain higher education (van Bavel 2006, Renskraft et al. 1992). Even when additional education provides negative income effects, schooling levels can rise, as evidenced from Norway shows (Hægeland et al. 2001). Educational expansion through status seeking may play an important role.

Attaining social status through education implies increasingly later and lower fertility and this effect becomes stronger over time. Some countries have experienced rapid increases in the school leaving age over recent years, while others have experienced only little educational growth from 1970 to 2000. As average schooling length increases, and large proportions of the population wish to be relatively highly educated, the average school leaving age increases. The educational length required to be among the top educated, say 80th percentile, increases continuously. Hence, the overall increase in educational length and particularly the average age at school leaving among the most educated increase dramatically over time. This self-reinforcing spiral has strong impacts on the timing and outcome of fertility across the world.