The effects of geography and education on fertility behaviour: The case of Colombia in 1973

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Abstract

Colombia experienced one of the fastest declines in fertility in the world: children per woman fell from 7 in 1960 to 3 in 1985. Despite the stark inequalities of the country, the regional character of the decline has been neglected in previous research. This paper assesses the role of culture, geography and education during the Colombian fertility transition. Using individual-level data from the complete census of 1973 and Local Indicators of Spatial Association this paper uncovers pre-transition low and high fertility geographical clusters. Low fertility clusters were located over the Andean mountain range, in municipalities close to important colonial cities, while high fertility areas were located in lowlands regions that experienced the expansion of the frontier after the 1870s. Using the Own Child Method this paper provides new fertility estimations for women living in these clusters. The results confirm that before 1960 there were significant differences in fertility levels between regions but after 1964 fertility declined at a similar rate in regions with different cultural and historical backgrounds. The results show that by 1973 strategies to limit fertility (e.g. starting, stopping) differed marginally across different geographical contexts and were mainly affected by the educational level of a woman, but not so much by her context (e.g. urbanisation). Furthermore, the effect of education is similar across the different contexts and the fertility gap between the lowest and highest educated women existed during the fertility transition while secondary education seems to be the main driver of the gradient. Despite cultural and geographical differences, the fertility decline in the country was not only fast but also widespread.

keywords*: fertility transition, geography, Colombia, census data, clustering*