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Title: The Promise and Peril of Fertility Reduction Among Indigenous Peoples



Fertility reductions that define the later stages of demographic transition are important catalysts of social change. These changes can have significant and lasting impacts on cultures, particularly in developing nations, as reductions in fertility fundamentally change the very population structure on which social organization is based. Population size and distribution influence marriage patterns, household labor economies, cooperative networks, community labor distribution, and a host of other social foundations. Anthropologists have long tracked changes in fertility among preindustrial populations as well as the resulting impacts on social systems, but less often do researchers find opportunities to gather ethnographic information during the earliest stages of fertility transition when social and economic pressures are catalyzing cultural and behavioral changes related to reproduction, which is often the case in contemporary development efforts. Among the indigenous Mayangna and Miskito populations of Nicaragua, a fertility transition is underway. Interestingly, this transition is preceding widespread participation in an industrialized economy, often the impetus for the early pressures that lead to reduced mortality and the following reductions in fertility that characterize demographic transitions. Reasons for this early fertility transition among these indigenous populations include governmental reproductive support programs, development work impacting social perceptions of reproductive norms, changing female agency to influence reproduction, and other social influences such as education and wage labor participation. While many of these will be illuminated in this presentation, this portion of the panel presentation will focus on examining the impact of development work on the autonomy of indigenous populations, as well as the preservation of their indigenous cultures. It is important to be duly cautious of their culture and their history when engaging in humanitarian work that aims for social reform such as fertility reduction. Frequently, Western preferences and ideals shape objectives in this work, but the imposition of such ideals can result in far-reaching and often unwanted consequences. This presentation will explore responsible ways to provide reproductive health support for vulnerable populations and contraceptive access for women in developing countries while remaining vigilant against unintended consequences for these already marginalized populations.