



CULTURE AND FERTILITY AND ITS IMPACT ON THE QUALITY OF CHILDREN: ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY IN THE BATAK TOBA COMMUNITY

Jasmen Manurung¹, Heru Sentosa², Asfriyati³, Nurman Achmad⁴

¹⁻³ Doctoral Study Program in Public Health Sciences, Faculty of Public Health, Universitas Sumatera Utara

⁴ Social Anthropology Study Program, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Sumatera Utara

Email: jasmenmanurung79@yahoo.com.

ABSTRACT

The Batak Toba community is one of the ethnic groups with the highest Total Fertility Rate (TFR) in Indonesia compared to several ethnic groups in Indonesia. This can also be seen from the high TFR of Samosir Regency (4.5) as the place where the Batak Toba community lives. This raises the question, what causes the high TFR in the Batak Toba community? So it is necessary to research to explore fertility in the Batak Toba community and its impact on children's health. This research was conducted as qualitative research with a topic-oriented ethnographic approach. Research begins in March 2022 until April 2024. Information is explored through in-depth interviews and moderate and sometimes passive participant observation. The research informants consisted of mothers who were over 49 years old and had more than 5 children, mothers of Childbearing Age Couples who were of productive age (15 to 49 years) and had 2 children. The determination of informants was determined using purposive techniques and snowball techniques. Research data analysis was carried out interactively. Gender inequality, understanding of religious teachings, large family size, and understanding the value of success in life are four important things related to fertility in the Batak Toba community. High TFR also has an impact on low nutritional requirements for children, which in turn affects the child's health status. The trend of decreasing or shifting beliefs in cultural values raises hopes that there will be a decline in fertility in the Batak Toba community. Education is an important aspect that can be used as a way to accelerate the decline in the strength of belief in cultural aspects which will then have an impact on decreasing fertility in the Batak Toba community.

Keywords: *TFR, Gender Inequality, Religion, Family Size*

INTRODUCTION

High fertility and low economic growth are common problems in developing countries (Ngo, 2020). Currently the world population will reach 8.05 billion in 2023 with a TFR of 2.27 and population growth of 0.8 percent (Annur, 2023).

There is indeed a downward trend in fertility in several countries in the world.

By the middle of the century, "more developed areas" had completed the historic transition from high fertility to low fertility (Bongaarts & Hodgson, 2022). Data shows household size in China has declined over the past 60 years from 4.3 people in 1953 to 3.1 people in 2017 (Ogihara, 2023). Vietnam also has a trend of decreasing births especially after the two-child policy was implemented in 1988

which reduced the probability of a woman having more than two children by 15 percentage points for young women and by 7 percentage points for middle-aged women and was associated with a decrease in the proportion of sons of 1.2 (Ngo, 2020). The same thing also happened in South Korea which experienced a 20 percent decline in TFR, from a very low level (1.05 TFR in 2017) to the lowest level (0.79), in just four years (Yenor, 2023).

The trend of decreasing TFR also occurred in Indonesia. The introduction of the Family Planning program in the 1970s means that Indonesia is currently at the stage of opening “windows of opportunity” (UNFPA, 2015). However, currently Indonesia still has a TFR of 2.29. This figure is higher than several ASEAN countries such as: Malaysia (1.98) and Singapore (1.14). According to United Nations (UN) data, Indonesia's TFR figure is relatively high (Indraswari & Yuhan, 2017).

One of the regions that has a high TFR is North Sumatra Province, which is one of the provinces that has a TFR above 2.4 (Kementerian Perencanaan Pembangunan Nasional, 2023). The high TFR figure for North Sumatra Province was also “contributed” by the high TFR of Samosir Regency (4.5) as the residence of the Batak Toba people (BKKBN, 2018), even compared to several ethnicities in Indonesia, the Batak ethnic group is one of the ethnicities that has the highest fertility. (Raharja, 2017).

This raises the question, what causes the high TFR in the Batak Toba

community? Is this related to cultural aspects, as proposed by Davis and Blake (1965) regarding cultural aspects as indirect variables that influence fertility? If yes, then what cultural aspects influence the high TFR of the Batak Toba community? How does it impact health?

Based on this, it is necessary to explore cultural aspects (beliefs, values, customs) related to fertility in the Toba Batak community to formulate a series of policies to reduce the TFR in the Toba Batak community, so as to improve the health status of children.

METHOD

The type of research used is qualitative research with a topic-oriented ethnographic approach. The topic of this research is the intellectual construct, knowledge, ideas, and beliefs of the Batak Toba people regarding fertility. The research was carried out in Palipi District, Samosir Regency. The location was chosen based on the consideration that this sub-district has the highest TFR (4.2) in Samosir Regency. It is also very easy to find mothers who are 40 years old but have given birth to more than five children. There is also a mother who has given birth to 13 children. Apart from that, Samosir Regency is the starting point and center of civilization for the Batak Toba people who still uphold the traditional values of the Batak Toba people.

The research began in March 2022 until April 2024. The intellectual construct, knowledge, ideas, and beliefs of the Batak Toba people regarding fertility were

explored through in-depth interviews, and information about cultural activities in daily life related to fertility was carried out using moderate and sometimes passive degrees of participant observation. The research informants consisted of mothers who were over 49 years old and had more than 5 children, and mothers of reproductive-age couples who were of productive age (15 to 49 years) and had 2 children. The determination of informants who are over 49 years old and have more than 5 children, Childbearing Age Couples who are of productive age and already have 2 children, family planning cadres, and Family Planning Field Officers (FPFO), are determined using purposive techniques. This is done based on consideration of data availability, including data on age, number of children, and addresses of childbearing-age couples.

To ensure trustworthiness, information obtained from informants is triangulated to FPFO, traditional leaders, and religious leaders. The determination of FPFO informants is determined based on the area of the Childbearing Age Couple selected as informants. Determination of informants from community figures is determined using the snowball technique. This technique was carried out because data was not available regarding the whereabouts and location of residence of religious and traditional leaders. The technique for determining informants will be carried out in a chain manner, namely the first informant is asked about their understanding of fertility from a cultural aspect. From the first informant, opinions

will be obtained about who else is known to understand fertility, then this will be continued until the informants collected are sufficient to answer the research problem. The research cycle is carried out starting from selecting an ethnographic project; formulating research issues (asking ethnographic questions); collecting ethnographic data; taking ethnographic notes; analyzing ethnographic data; and finally writing an ethnographic report. Research data analysis was carried out interactively through three channels, namely: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions (Matthew B. Miles, 2009) (Matthew B. Miles, 2009).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of this research were obtained from in-depth interviews, and moderate and sometimes passive participant observation. Data saturation occurred after interviewing 11 mother informants who were over 49 years old and had more than 5 children, 13 mothers of Childbearing Age Couples who were of productive age (15 to 49 years) had 2 children. The information obtained was then triangulated to FPFO, traditional leaders, and religious leaders.

The information obtained was analyzed and compiled to answer two research focuses, namely cultural aspects related to fertility and its impact on maternal and child health. The data that has been coded is then grouped into categories and produces four themes which form the construction of the Batak Toba community's knowledge about aspects



related to fertility. The four themes are gender inequality, religion, large family size, and understanding the value of success in life. The same thing was done to analyze the impact of fertility on children's health status. Information obtained from informants produced a theme, namely the impact on children's nutritional adequacy.

Gender Inequality and Fertility

Gender inequality is also an important part that influences high fertility in the Batak Toba community. For the Batak Toba people, boys have a more important position than girls. Most of the groups of mothers who are over 49 years old and have more than 5 children and mothers of couples of childbearing age want their first child to be a boy. Mothers also still want the birth of a son even though they already have two daughters, only a small percentage can accept this situation. The reasons given by the mother include continuing the bloodline/clan, there is no son yet. The presence or absence of boys can influence the fertility patterns of the Batak Toba community. If there is no son, the family continues to try to get one even though they already have many daughters. This cultural practice of patrilineality encourages Batak Toba people to have many sons (*sinuan tunas*) so they can continue their lineage (*marga*).

The role of boys is very important for the Toba Batak community in the continuation of generations. Mothers who cannot give birth to sons are very vulnerable to divorce, even though having

enough daughters is still common in Batak Toba society (Simangunsong, 2012).

Different things happen when discussing the female gender as the first child. The reasons given were domestic in nature, such as: being able to help parents take care of their younger siblings, doing work at home, looking after younger siblings, and women being more agile. This shows that the Toba Batak people still identify women with domestic roles such as cooking food for family needs, taking care of children, washing clothes and various other domestic roles. (Simangunsong, 2012).

This also proves the unequal position of boys and girls in the Batak Toba community. The gender of the desired child also influences fertility levels (Yusuf et al., 2014). This is widely adhered to by tribes in Indonesia. Child gender preferences are also often found in Indonesia. For the Acehnese, boys are important. They consider that Acehnese boys can be the pride of the family and also the successor of their descendants (Laksono & Wulandari, 2019).

Women who do not have children experience greater psychological distress than women who have children and seek more support from rabbis and fewer ties to society (Nouman & Benyamini, 2019).

Child gender preference is one of the factors that influences fertility (Yusuf et al., 2014). Many developing countries in East, South and Southeast Asia, parents have a very strong preference for the gender of sons. One of the reasons why parents prefer sons over daughters in these

countries is because sons act as social security for parents in their old age (Ngo, 2020).

This happens in various parts of the world. As a patrilineal society, son preference is deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture. Most parents have a very strong desire to have at least one son related to their old age (Ogihara, 2023).

Religion And Fertility

Understanding religious teachings is an important thing that influences fertility. The Toba Batak community, especially those in Palipi District, Samosir Regency, is predominantly Protestant. They relate the concept of fertility. Having children is God's command as written in Genesis 1: 28 "God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground". This is reinforced by the arguments presented by religious figures.

The same thing was found in the Lani tribe/people in Tolikara Regency, Papua. Christian teachings encouraged them to spread religion on the surface of the earth, this was done by increasing their offspring (Laksono & Wulandari, 2019).

Several research results on fertility link belief in religious teachings with fertility. The tendency is that the stronger you understand religious teachings, the higher the number of children you want. We can see how belief in God's will is associated with high fertility. There are

those who believe that having many children is God's command (Hossain & Hossain, 2023), so they don't worry about high fertility (Rodrigues et al., 2022), they even had to produce many descendants to spread and dominate the earth (Laksono & Wulandari, 2019).

Davis and Blake (1965) referred to these as indirect variables that influence fertility. Some of these variables are social, economic and cultural factors (Blake, 2011).

However, something important was found, namely the difference in the strength of belief between generations. In contrast to the older generation, the younger generation tends to be more realistic about the number of children. They found a middle ground between religious teachings and the number of children. They still believe that having two children is part of their belief in religious teachings, not necessarily an unlimited number. The most important thing is how to ensure that parenting patterns run well to produce quality children as a form of responsibility for God's grace.

Family Size and Fertility

There are differences regarding family size norms for the two informants. Mothers who are over 49 years old and have more than 5 children believe that the ideal number of children is 4 children with 2 boys and 2 girls. According to the mother, the number of children they now have is not the ideal number, but it is an agreement with her husband, although they don't really mind this. Different things were found in

mothers of Childbearing Age Couple who were of productive age and had 2 children, where the ideal number of children was 2 (1 boy and 1 girl).

This indicates a decrease in the ideal number of children in the Batak Toba community in the younger generation. This condition is strengthened by the TFR trend in the Batak Toba community. When compared to TFR data according to BKKBN (2018) with data from the 2020 Long Form (LF) Population Census, there has indeed been a decrease in TFR, where the TFR figure for Humbang Hasundutan Regency decreased from 4.8 to 3.17, Samosir Regency from 4.5 decreased to 2.98, Toba Regency decreased from 4.3 to 2.97 and North Tapanuli Regency decreased from 4.5 to 2.87. However, the TFR in these four districts is still higher than the TFR for North Sumatra Province of 2.48 and is still far from the government's target of 2.1 (BPS, 2023).

Usually, the older generation will be a reference for the younger generation to determine the number of children they will have (family size) and this will have an impact on fertility, even the number of grandchildren the mother-in-law wants has an impact on the mother's fertility. (Kumar et al., 2016).

It seems that education plays a very important role in changes in the desired family size. This can be seen from the education level of the younger generation which is relatively better than the older generation. The younger generation of mothers is also more realistic in considering

their ability to care for children, thus deciding on fewer children.

Empirical evidence about the influence of education on fertility occurs almost throughout the world. Yen, W.K., Rasiah, R and Turner, J.J. (2018) who conducted a study on fertility in 108 countries in the world showed that there is a significant and negative relationship between education and fertility. This model also involves developing countries and countries in the African and Asian regions (Wun Kim Yen, Ratneswary Rasiah, 2018).

The influence of maternal education on fertility is not only in urban areas but also in rural areas. In their research on factors that influence fertility in rural areas, Sinaga, L., Hardiani, and Prihanto, P.H., (2017) found that the level of education negatively influences the mother's fertility level both directly and indirectly, namely through the variable age at first marriage. (Sinaga et al., 2017). Likewise, research results (Mahendra, 2017) state that the level of education influences fertility in Indonesia.

Value of Life Success and Fertility

One of their main reasons is the belief that having many children is a way to achieve happiness or success in life. This concept is related to the concept of happiness or success in life. The Batak Toba people have their own concept of fertility. Having a large number of children is an indicator of success in life. A person will be called successful if he has three elements, namely *Hamoraon* (wealth/possessions), *Hagabeon* (many

children/descendants) and *Hasangapon* (honor). These three words form a unit that complements and supports each other as an ideal guide for the Toba Batak people. The ideal goal and highest happiness in life of the Toba Batak people is how to achieve these three elements together (Pangaribuan, 2018)

These values show that one indicator of life success in the Batak Toba community is having many children. There are many *umpasa* (phrases containing prayers and hopes) so that couples will have many children, both boys and girls. These various expressions will be conveyed at various ceremonies in the Batak Toba community's life cycle (birth, marriage, and death ceremony).

These values are very strongly embedded in the thinking of mothers in the older generation. Currently, the Batak Toba people in the current generation have begun to experience a slight paradigm shift regarding the number of children. The sayings about prayer and the hope to have many children slowly shifted to fewer children. For example, a greeting conveys hope to a new family that they will have three children who are smart and successful in life. The most important thing is of course the quality of children, not quantity. This also shows that there is a tendency that the younger the mother is, the less children she will have. The same thing also happens between the mother's age and the ideal number of children desired.

Freedman said that established fertility 'norms' accepted by society may or may not correspond to the desired fertility.

Apart from that, social norms are considered as a dominant factor. Intermediate variables directly influence fertility while intermediate variables themselves are influenced by many factors (Blake, 2011).

Impact on Children's Nutritional Adequacy

A high TFR has an impact on children's nutritional needs not being met. Mothers who are over 49 years old and have more than 5 children admit that they experience various difficulties in meeting their children's nutritional needs. Barren land cannot produce many agricultural products that can be consumed or sold to make money. Parents must look for various ways to overcome this difficult situation. This limitation causes children's nutritional needs to not be met. Different things were obtained from couples of childbearing age who had 2 children who relatively did not experience significant difficulties in meeting their children's nutritional needs.

The relationship between high fertility and nutritional fulfillment in children can be traced through the opinion of the Malthusian (Suharto, 2020). High fertility will cause a reduction in food availability which will have an impact on reducing the fulfillment of children's nutritional needs. Low nutritional requirements for children will then lead to malnutrition in children.

CONCLUSION

Gender inequality, understanding of religious teachings, large family size, and

understanding the value of success in life are four important things related to fertility in the Batak Toba community. High TFR also has an impact on low nutritional requirements for children, which in turn has an impact on the child's health status. The trend of decreasing or shifting beliefs in cultural values raises hopes that there will be a decline in fertility in the Batak Toba community. Education is an important aspect that can be used as a way to accelerate the decline in the strength of belief in cultural aspects which will then have an impact on decreasing fertility in the Batak Toba community.

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