

## **Effects of rural-urban return migration on women's family planning and reproductive health related attitude and behavior in rural China**

Jiajian Chen<sup>1</sup>, Hongyan Liu<sup>2</sup>, Zhenming Xie<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>East-West Center, Honolulu, U.S.A., <sup>2</sup>China Population and Development Research Center, Beijing, China

### **Introduction**

Rural-urban migration has been a major social movement in China, along with the dramatic economic reform and rapid demographic transition, over the last two decades. The rural-urban migration has resulted from both a rapid but uneven regional economic growth and a gradually relaxed household registration system, under which, rural-urban migrants from poorer and less developed regions can obtain temporary residence permits in economically more developed regions, but do not have the same rights of the people with permanent urban household registration (Davin 1996a; Zhu 2003). According to the 2000 census, the growth of this “floating population” has reached 144 million and nearly half of which are women (Liang and Ma 2005). Due to the institutional constraints under the current household registration system, rural-urban migrants are not motivated to stay in the city on a permanent basis. It is estimated that about one third of them have returned home (Murphy 2002; Zhao 2002; Wang and Fan 2006).

This massive migration is known to have played an important role in meeting the demand for labor forces in the expanding urban economies and in providing opportunity for many villagers to move away from subsistence farming to achieve upward mobility (Yang 2000). While much research interest has focused on the economic conditions or demographic behaviors of the migrants in the destination areas, concern is growing over the impact of return migration on women's position and reproductive health related attitudes and behaviors in the sending areas (Davin 1999, 2005; Murphy 2002; Zheng and Xie, 2004; Roberts and Connelly 2007). It is generally believed that migrant women are profoundly affected by their experiences under the influence of the urban culture and when they return they will take back with them to the villages notions of love, small families, and different expectations of women's roles and greater aspiration for their children (Davin, 1996, 1999, 2005). However, other studies suggest that because migrants who are most affected by the migration are least likely to return while those who respond least positively to urban life will be most likely to return, the impact of return migration on sending areas would be mixed and even negative for rural development (Bai and He 2003; Roberts and Connelly 2007). Evidence of social and economic consequences of migration in sending areas in China is not conclusive.

In this study, we adopt the concept of diffusion as it is used in the family planning and migration literature to explore the potential impact of rural-urban migration on women's family planning and reproductive health related attitude and behavior in the sending community of rural China. Our findings provide new evidence to the development of theories on the social and demographic consequences of rural-urban migration in sending communities.

According to Davis (1963), rural-urban migration is one of the multiple responses of the rural population to pressures on the economic well being of peasant families in the evolving economy. Goldscheider (1987) further viewed migration as a vehicle or mechanism of moving traditional people into contact with modernity, linking return migration to social change in rural areas. It is also emphasized that the linkages of migration and social change are not mechanical or automatic but involve a process of direct diffusion of urban modernity to rural areas.

Consistent with this view on migration, recent study finds that the diffusion effects of migration on contraceptive knowledge and use are strong in rural-urban migration (including migration to high-income international destinations (Lindstrom and Muniz-Franco 2005). This finding supports the recent theories of fertility decline that emphasize the role of social interactions (Goldman et al 2001; Montgomery and Casterline 1996; Bongaarts and Watkins 1996).

This recent theoretical development brings attention to the possible diffusion effect of the massive rural-urban migration on family planning and reproductive health related attitudes and behaviors in rural China. It is known that the fertility preference and use of maternal health care service in rural China are still strongly influenced by traditional culture that has been tied with a patriarchic tradition and by its agriculturally self-sufficient closed economy (Chen et al 2007; Li 2006). The traditional son preference culture is so persistent that the one-child-family policy has to allow rural population in many areas to have a second birth if the first one is a girl. Soon after the 1994 Cairo International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), the government announced a reform of its family planning program by placing greater emphasis on reproductive health in 1995. Since then, progress has been made in improving the quality of reproductive health services. However, current policy makers are reluctant to relax the one-child policy further to allow all child-bearing aged couples to have a second birth due to a great concern of whether the fertility may go up to more than two children per family if and when policy and enforcement are substantially relaxed, especially in rural China.

The objective of this study is to examine effects of return migration on women's family planning and reproductive health attitudes and behaviors in sending areas of rural China. We hypothesize that rural-urban migration is an important mechanism of diffusion of family planning and reproductive health attitudes and behaviors in sending areas of rural China. We also posit that women living in a rural sending community, where more other women have rural-urban migration experience, are more likely to have adopted family planning and reproductive health related attitudes and behaviors regardless of their own migration experience.

### **Data and methods**

Data used in this study are from a sample survey of 3,186 women aged 16-40 who were returned migrants or had never migrated in Sichuan and Anhui provinces, conducted by the Center of Population and Information and Beijing University during August and September of 2000. Respondents were drawn from a stratified multistage cluster random sample of childbearing-age women in 2 townships from each of 2 selected counties in

Anhui and Sichuan provinces, where migration is prevalent and economy is mainly agricultural and is at the average level.

Of each selected township, the survey randomly selected three to five villages. Within each sampled village, all women who were aged 20-35 were eligible for interview and a few childbearing age women who were younger than 20 or older than 35 were also included due to smaller sample size of some of the villages. In total, about 100 women from each of 39 villages were interviewed. As a result, 3,186 women aged 16-40 years old who were either returned migrants or non-migrants from 39 villages were interviewed (Zheng and Xie 2004). As most of the respondents (98%) in the survey are married and information on the education level of women and their husbands is included in the analyses, this study is restricted to married women only.

We used multilevel logistic regression models to estimate the effects of migration on family planning and reproductive health attitude and behavior by controlling for other individual- and community-level characteristics.

## **Results**

Our multilevel analysis finds that returned rural-urban migrant women are more likely to adopt family planning and reproductive related attitudes, knowledge, and behavior than non-migrant women in sending areas of rural China after controlling for other selected socioeconomic characteristics at individual level and community level. Further, our study also finds that a woman's acceptance of the new fertility norm and her knowledge of contraceptive methods are also influenced by the experience of other women's experience of rural-urban migration in the community.

## **Discussion**

Our findings of significant effects of rural-urban return migration provide important policy implications for the reform of China's family planning program towards reproductive health. Despite existing institutional constraints of the household registration system, return rural-urban migrants are potential agents of diffusion of new fertility norms and reproductive health related behavior in sending areas of rural China. If the massive rural-urban migration and frequent flow of return migration will continue in China's modernization process, the link of rural-urban migration to the significant social change in rural China will be greater. As such, greater impacts of rural-urban migration on adoption of voluntary family planning and reproductive health related attitudes and behaviors are possible in rural China in the near future.