

The total fertility rate (TFR) gives an indication of the number of children an average woman will have in her lifetime. The size of the population remains stable if the total fertility rate is a little over two, allowing for some mortality during infancy and childhood. This so-called “replacement rate” is around 2.1 children per women for industrialised countries but it may be higher for poorer countries.

Total fertility rates vary in the Asia/Pacific region (Figure 4.3, Panel A). In 2011, women in the region had on average 2.4 children compared with OECD countries at 1.7 children. Women in island countries such as Timor-Leste and Solomon Islands have a high fertility rate of more than four children per woman. By contrast, China, Thailand, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Hong Kong (China), Singapore and Macau (China) all have TFRs that are below the OECD average. In many of these economies, TFRs have been below two children per woman for some time, e.g. since 1975 in Japan; since 1976 in Singapore; and since 1984 in the Republic of Korea. These countries have introduced various measures, including financial supports for families with children, but so far with limited success. China’s family planning policy has kept its birth rate at a low rate since it was first introduced in the late 1970s. The recent relaxation of the rules on the number of children per family may bring the Chinese TFR closer to replacement rate level.

Birth rates have declined sharply over the last two decades (Figure 4.3, Panel B). The Asia/Pacific region experienced an annual decline of 1.9 children per woman from 1980 to 2011. OECD member countries in the region, with the exception of the Republic of Korea, experienced a slow decline in the TFR at less than 0.5 child per woman compared with a large number of non-OECD member economies with declines in excess of four children per woman in Bhutan and Bangladesh. The Maldives had the largest annual decrease of more than five children per woman: the TFR in the Maldives fell from over seven children per woman in 1980 to 1.7 in 2011. New Zealand and Timor-Leste are the two countries which had higher TFRs in 2011 than in 1980.

Women in poor economies have much higher fertility rates than women in wealthier economies (Figure 4.4.). In 2011, women in OECD and East Asian economies had the fewest children compared with the greater Asia/Pacific region. As more women gain higher education and enter the labour force, women tend to postpone having children and/or have less children altogether. **In countries where birth rates for adolescent women are high** – and where many young people are married (see “Marriage and divorce”), **overall fertility rates are also relatively high** (Figure 4.5).

Definition and measurement

The total fertility rate (TFR) in a specific year corresponds to the number of children that would be born to each woman if she were to live to the end of her childbearing years and if the likelihood of her giving birth to children at each life stage followed the currently prevailing age-specific fertility rates. The adolescent birth rate is defined as the annual number of births per 1 000 women aged 15 to 19.

The data presented here are extracted from the World Bank’s *World Development Indicators online Database* (<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN/countries>) which for population data uses the United Nations Population Statistics as its key source (<http://esa.un.org/wpp/>). These population statistics are based on administrative “vital registration” data, census data and/or survey data, and the quality of these sources is likely to vary across countries.

Further reading

Shin, Y., J. Yoo, H. Kim and J. Yoon (2013), “Comparative Study of Family Policy in East Asia, Korea, China, Japan, Singapore”, OECD Korea Policy Centre/Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs, Seoul, www.oecd-korea.org/user/nd12191.do?itemShCd1=44.

Figure 4.3. Fertility rates and changes

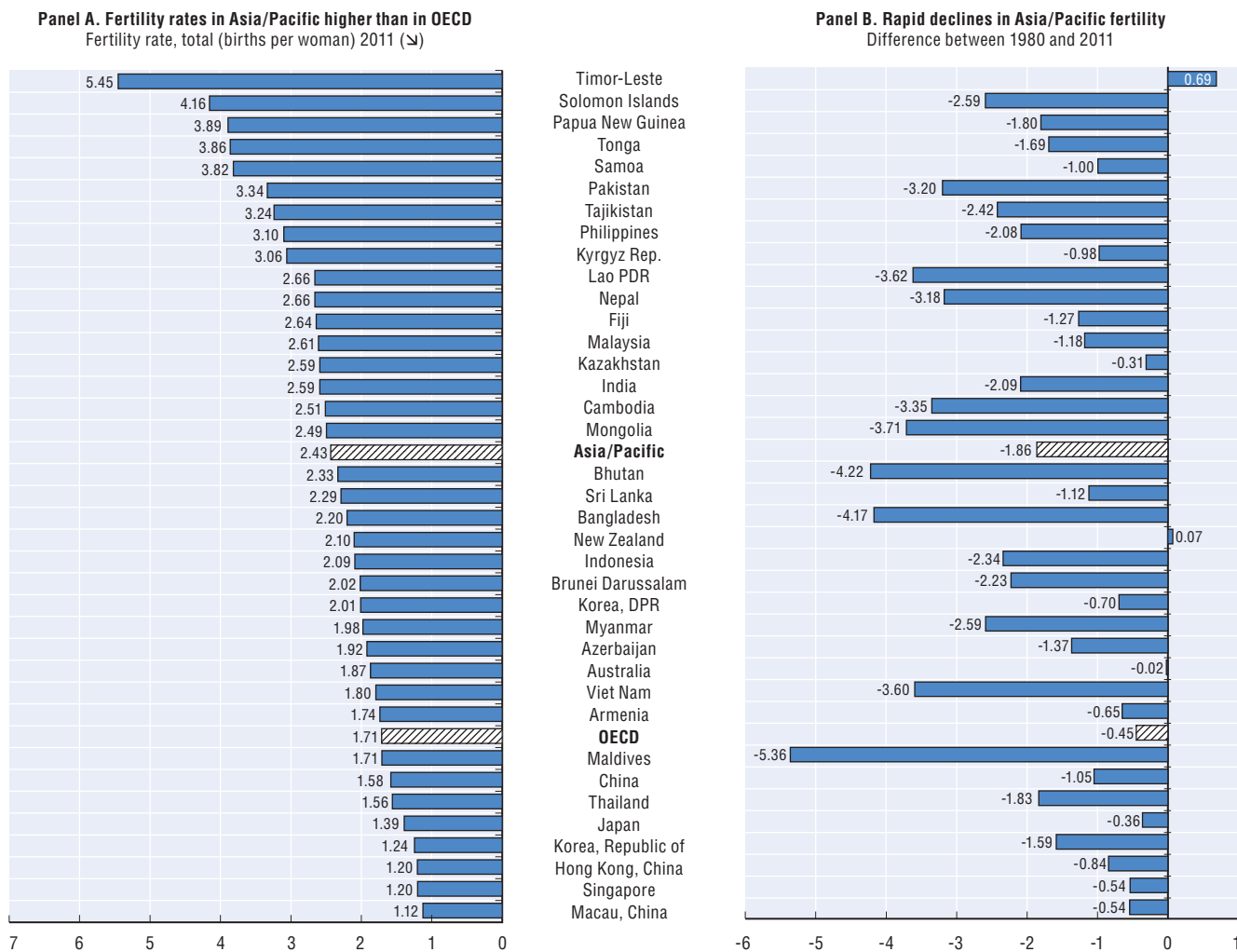


Figure 4.4. Richer countries have lower fertility rates

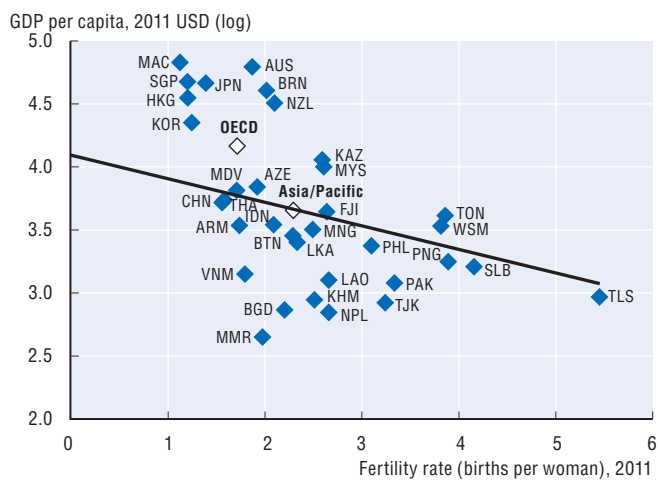
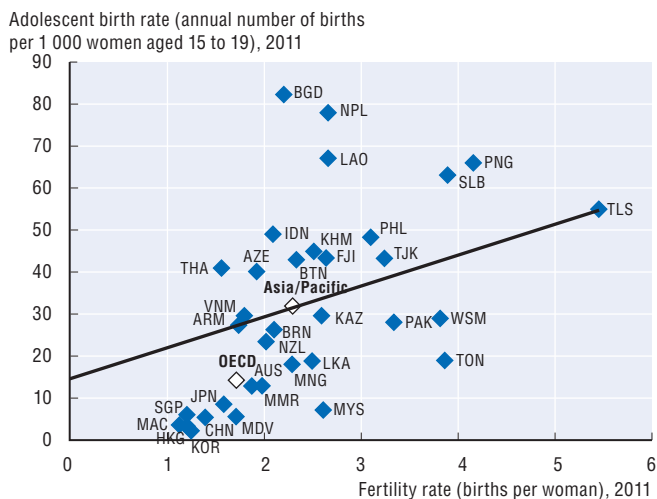
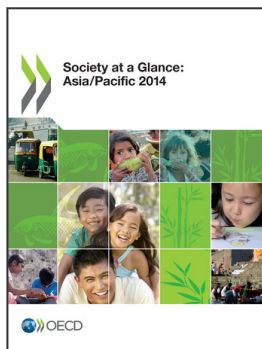


Figure 4.5. Countries with high fertility tend to also have high adolescent birth rates



Source: World Bank, World Development Indicators, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator>.

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