The Impact of Increased College Attendance Among Young Women on Birth Rates and Family Formation

Introduction The relationship between the rising number of young women attending college and its impact on birth rates and family formation is complex. While higher education is correlated with lower birth rates and delayed family formation, the causal mechanisms depend on social, economic, and cultural factors. This document examines whether the high number of women in college is causing a “dramatic” decrease in birth rates and family formation, drawing on evidence and addressing key points.

Key Observations

- **Correlation Between Education and Fertility**
  - **Global Trends**: Higher educational attainment among women is associated with lower total fertility rates (TFR). In high-income countries, college-educated women have fewer children (TFR ~1.3–1.7) and delay childbirth compared to those without degrees (TFR ~2–3).
  - **U.S. Context**: From 1971 to 2012, the percentage of U.S. women ages 25–29 with a four-year degree rose from 14% to 37%, while the TFR declined from 2.2 in 2008 to 1.6 recently. This suggests correlation, not causation.
- **Mechanisms Linking College to Fertility**
  - **Delayed Childbearing**: College extends education and career establishment, delaying childbirth. The average age at first birth for college-educated women increased from ~25 to 30 between the 1970s and 1990s.
  - **Economic Factors**: Higher education leads to better-paying jobs, increasing the opportunity cost of childbearing. Student debt (42% of borrowers hold an associate’s degree or less) delays marriage and childbearing.
  - **Cultural Norms**: Education shifts views on family size and gender roles, with college-educated women often preferring smaller families or prioritizing careers. Feminist identity correlates with delayed marriage and lower fertility.
  - **Marriage Patterns**: College-educated women delay marriage, which is tied to fertility (married women have 3–4% higher birth rates). Marriage rates among women ages 25–29 dropped 15.9% from 2006 to 2019.
- **Heterogeneous Effects by Background**
  - College significantly reduces fertility for women from disadvantaged backgrounds or with lower early achievement (e.g., 65% fewer children). For women predisposed to college, the effect is weaker, and completion may slightly increase fertility (e.g., 8% more children).
  - This suggests socioeconomic context shapes the impact.
- **Nonmarital Childbearing Trends**
  - Nonmarital first births among college-educated women rose from 4% in 1996 to 18–27% in 2018. Many marry before a second birth, indicating a shift in family formation sequences rather than a rejection of family.
- **Field of Study and Fertility**
  - Women in fields like arts or social sciences have higher childlessness rates, while those in teaching or health may have higher fertility, reflecting alignment with nurturing roles.
- **Counterarguments and Complexities**
  - **Not the Sole Driver**: Declining religiosity, economic instability, and changing marriage norms also lower birth rates. Non-religious women have lower fertility (2–2.4 fewer children) than religious women.

- **U-Shaped Fertility**: Women with advanced degrees may have more children than those with bachelor's degrees, due to access to childcare or flexible work.
- **Policy Support**: Countries with robust family policies (e.g., childcare, parental leave) show higher fertility among educated women.
- **Men's Role**: Fewer "marriageable men" due to economic instability affects family formation.

Is the Impact "Dramatic"?

- **Birth Rates**: The U.S. TFR (1.6) is below replacement level (2.1), with college-educated women contributing through fewer and later births. However, the decline is more pronounced among less-educated groups due to economic constraints.
- **Family Formation**: College delays family formation (average age at first birth >30), but many women still form families, often non-traditionally (e.g., nonmarital births).
- **Exaggeration in Claims**: Claims on platforms like X that college is the "biggest determinant" of lower birth rates oversimplify the issue, ignoring economic and cultural factors.

Critical Examination

- **Establishment Narrative**: Education empowers women, but structural barriers (e.g., debt, lack of childcare) exacerbate fertility declines.
- **Alternative Perspectives**: Prolonged education may delay family formation unnecessarily, amplified by cultural shifts toward individualism.
- **Unintended Consequences**: High college attendance may contribute to labor shortages by 2032 due to lower birth rates.

Conclusion

The high number of young women attending college contributes significantly to lower birth rates and delayed family formation, particularly through delayed childbearing, economic trade-offs, and shifting norms. However, it is not the sole or "dramatic" cause. Other factors, including declining marriage rates and economic instability, play critical roles. Policies like affordable childcare and reduced student debt could mitigate these effects, balancing career and family aspirations.