

Less child mortality among taller women in developing countries

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Each centimeter/inch counts for women in developing countries. This is the outcome of research by Christiaan Monden of Tilburg University and Jeroen Smits of Radboud University Nijmegen in the Netherlands, which was recently published online in *American Journal of Human Biology*. Data from 42 developing countries showed that babies and young children have better survival chances if their mothers are taller.

Using data from the Nijmegen “Database Developing World” for almost 200,000 mothers and 300,000 births in 42 developing countries, sociologists Christiaan Monden and Jeroen Smits show that the likelihood that children die directly after birth or in their first years is smaller if the mother is taller. The mothers varied in height between 134 and 178 cm (4’5” and 5’10”).

The effect of height is remarkably stable. There are hardly any systematic differences within or among countries. Only education of the mother was found to matter: for mothers without education height is more important than for mothers with some primary school. A higher level of education is associated with lower child mortality. The study also showed that twins (who usually experience higher mortality) benefit more than average of a taller mother.

Monden and Smits mention two explanations for the height effect. Taller women have wider pelves (as a result of which they give birth more easily) and they have on average a better health than shorter women. Adult height is to a certain extent genetically predisposed, but also

strongly related to the circumstances experienced during early youth. Food shortages and disease during the first years lead to stunted growth and lower general health during adulthood. Hence, hardship in childhood is not only bad for ones own health but also reduces the survival chances of the next generation.

The results apply only to developing countries. In developed countries the level of child mortality is so low that height of the mother can make less difference.

The Database Developing World (DDW) is a data infrastructure built by researchers of Radboud University Nijmegen. The DDW contains information on health, education, demographics and many other topics for 10 million persons in over 100 developing countries. By combining information at micro-, meso- en macro level, the researchers aim to derive more precise outcomes and better policy recommendations. Jeroen Smits is manager of the Database Developing World

Provided by Radboud University, Netherlands

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