Availability and Prevalence of Methods

Except for the condom, the use of each method is highest where the availability of that method is highest. For example, in the countries with greatest use of the pill (36–44%), the level of availability is 76–80%. Likewise, the highest prevalence of female sterilization (35–41%) is found in countries where 71–80% of the population have access to the method.

The patterns shown in Figure 3 reflect a crowding of some countries at the maximum value, which as noted is 80–100% of the population. Figure 3 is restricted to 1999; in earlier years, the patterns were similar, but countries were clustered at lower values of both availability and prevalence.*

Except for the results for the condom, this method-specific examination of availability and prevalence supports the results shown in Figure 1 for the means of availability and prevalence of the four methods together.

Prevalence Related to Availability

When the mean level of availability is in the middle range, the diversity (variation) among methods can be either great or small. That is, the same mean can result from all four methods being equally available or from variation among them—e.g., with two at high levels and two at low levels. In the first case, some of the population has basic access to all four methods; in the second case, the population has more access to two methods, but less to two others. Also, depending on how the various methods are geographically distributed, access to individual methods may vary across subgroups, as when urban residents live near facilities that offer the IUD and sterilization and rural residents are served by programs that distribute the pill and the condom.

Here we explore how prevalence relates to the interplay of the level and diversity of availability, with diversity measured by the standard deviation across the four methods. We begin by comparing countries that have a low mean for the availability of all four contraceptive methods with countries that have a high mean. The preferred situation is a relatively high mean availability and a low standard deviation, meaning that all methods are easily and uniformly accessible. The reverse case is the unfortunate combination of a low mean and a low standard deviation, indicating that all methods are uniformly unavailable. Contraceptive prevalence is expected to be quite high in the first instance and quite low in the second. (Note that a very high or a very low mean can occur only with a very low standard deviation, because diversity among methods precludes extreme averages.)

For couples to enjoy a good choice, they need ready access to a variety of methods; in that case, each method will

*Female sterilization is different, in the sense that a country can attain high prevalence over the years even though availability is modest in each year. A low annual adoption rate still tends to produce high prevalence in the long run because continuation is so prolonged.