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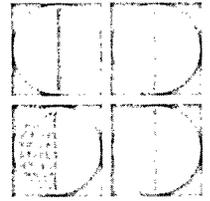
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Narrowing Sex Differentials in Life Expectancy in the Industrialized World: Early 1970's to Early 1990's



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ABSTRACT: Between the early 1970's and 1990's, twelve industrialized nations experienced for the first time a narrowing of their sex differences in life expectancy at age zero. In another set of countries, the differential has not yet reached a stage of convergence, although in some of these nations the female advantage appears to be increasing at a slower pace than ever before. We discuss the demographic and epidemiologic conditions for this new and largely unanticipated trend, as well as its applied and theoretical implications in the context of the following questions: (1) Is the observed change a function of males' faster pace of gains in life expectancy since the early 1970s? (2) What is the relationship between country differences in socioeconomic development (as measured by GNP) and the degree of convergence in the sex gap in average length of life? (3) What is the degree of association between temporal change in age-sex specific death rates and change in the sex gap in life expectancy over the twenty-year interval between the early 1970s and early 1990s? Our results indicate that where some convergence has taken place, in relation to women, men have experienced more rapid gains in survival; the higher a nation's level of social and economic development, the greater the amount of convergence in male and female life expectancies. The most pronounced age-specific association with the changing sex gap in longevity is that of ages 25-59, where the greater reductions in male mortality, as compared to that for females, contributed to a significant portion of the observed convergence in life expectancy across industrialized nations.

Since the turn of this century, the sex gap in life expectancy has widened in all Western countries from approximately two to three years in favor of women, to the current difference in the range of four to seven years (Lopez, 1983; Nathanson, 1984; Nathanson and Lopez, 1989; Tomason, 1984; Waldron, 1976; Wingard, 1984). However, between the early 1970's and the early part of the 1990's, some industrialized nations have experienced for the first time a narrowing of their sex differences in life expectancy at age zero. In

another set of countries the differential has not yet reached a stage of convergence, but over the last two decades the female advantage appears to be increasing at a slower pace than ever before. By its very nature, this unprecedented development falls in the same class of phenomena as the baby boom and baby bust of the post-War years and the unanticipated reductions in old-age mortality since the early part of the 1970's (Stone and Fletcher, 1986; Manton, 1982; Fries, 1980; Olshansky and Ault, 1986). Common to these de-