

Editorial

Family Planning: Where Does Pakistan Stand?

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Editor

The world's population is still growing. Although the *rate* of growth has been declining since the 1960s, global population grows each year by approximately 80 million people, or the equivalent of the population of a country the size of Germany. Nearly all of this growth is concentrated in the developing nations of the world, in many of which fertility rates remain high. High fertility can impose costly burdens on developing nations. It may impede opportunities for economic development, increase health risks for women and children, and erode the quality of life by reducing access to education, nutrition, employment, and scarce resources such as potable water. Furthermore, surveys of women in developing countries suggest that a large percentage--from 10 to 40 percent--want to space or limit childbearing but are not using contraception. This finding indicates a continuing, unmet need for contraception. These are just a handful of issues a country can possibly face due to high fertility rates and consequently a huge population, which is exactly what is being seen in Pakistan at the moment.

To highlight some family planning programs, China and Indonesia are at the forefront, though I'll exclude China from this discourse as Pakistan, as a nation cannot identify with the Chinese on a religious level. Now talking about Indonesia, the family planning program over there has been effective over the last four decades and is now being quoted as a 'success story' around the globe – especially in resource-constrained economies.

One key element of this program involved developing a strategic partnership between the government and Muslim religious leaders. The continuous engagement of Indonesia's government with the prominent leaders of religious organizations has yielded several fatwas that have played an instrumental role making family planning initiatives acceptable on the community level.

Without the support of Muslim religious leaders, the family planning program in Indonesia would not have successfully contributed to the decline in the fertility rate from 5.6 at the beginning of the program to 2.3 at present.

In 1947, at the time of Independence, Pakistan's population was 31 million. The fertility rate was 7.5

per women and the population growth rate was 4.5 percent per year. In the 1990's, the fertility and population growth rates were reduced to 5.1 and 2.9, respectively. But this reduction is negligible. By 2035, Pakistan's population is projected to have hit 260 million (as per UNFPA, Pakistan).

Pakistan faces a daunting challenge. According to initial estimates, it is currently the world's sixth largest country in terms of population and is likely to become the third largest contributor to world population growth. According to UN projections, Pakistan's population will grow to over 380 million by the year 2050, surpassing Indonesia, Brazil, Russia and the US to become the world's third most populous country after India and China. With one of highest population growth rate for any Asian country, Pakistan will certainly experience a dramatic decline in the per capita availability of arable land, water and forest resources. The rapid population growth – which stands at three percent per year – is already eroding economic gains. The question that now arises is: what went wrong and why?

Notwithstanding the difficulties in confronting family planning programs, there is evidence of a change in behavior among Pakistani society. A World Bank study conducted in 2014 revealed that men are showing an increased interest in family planning services and contraception. However, they are unable to avail them primarily due to the poor economic climate and its implication for large families.

In 2015, a landmark meeting was organized with the collaboration of UNFPA the Population Council. During this meeting, the ulema from across the country endorsed a declaration to allow the use of all reversible family planning methods that can help women plan the timing and spacing of their pregnancies in a bid to avoid maternal deaths and improve the overall health of families.

They unanimously offered their support in promoting birth-spacing services and thereby creating a healthy and prosperous society. The religious leaders and heads of religious institutions also affirmed that Islam declares the preservation and maintenance of human life as an inalienable right of all individuals

and families. They said the religion supports all measures, means and approaches that are in conformity to Islamic teachings to ensure this basic right.

Just like Indonesia, Iran and Bangladesh, Pakistan should also involve the religious community and consider them stakeholders in achieving the sustainable development goals.

Pakistan should also combat the organizational and management issues that have plagued its family planning programs to achieve coverage and effectiveness. The approach to delivering family planning services should also be altered to improve the overall status of women.

The most important steps that have been suggested include expanding family planning concept beyond FP so they can also tackle concerns on reproductive health services. Other recommendations include generating a positive attitude among public officials, organizing effective media campaigns through celebrity endorsements, improving the existing service quality and providing vasectomies and other reproductive services. Giving priority to the education of women, encouraging religious leaders to endorse the programs and emphasizing the role of donor agencies to continue with their responsibility are some other steps that will eventually support a struggling economy and a young nation.