

LETTER TO EDITOR

The Ripple Effect of Family Planning in Pakistan and the Lack Thereof

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INTRODUCTION

Dear Editor,

The crucial role of family planning and the use of contraceptive methods in Pakistan is markedly low. According to the latest estimates from the United Nations in 2018, Pakistan has a population of over 202 million, making it the 6th most populous country in the world.¹ In such a populous developing country with poor lifestyle and lack of quality healthcare, the scarcity of family planning becomes detrimental. Its domino effect can be seen directly in Pakistan with the highest maternal and infant mortality rates as revealed by UNICEF.² Not only does the lack of family planning adversely affect health, but the growing population can possibly impede financial stability and weaken the pace of overall social development.

There are several key factors that hinder family planning practice, including financial problems in lower socioeconomic segments, the impact of ethical and religious notions, and, essentially, the lack of general awareness. As a Muslim majority country, Pakistan's religious scholars have argued over the permissibility of contraception in Islam as well as viewed family planning as an external Western conspiracy curtailing the growth of the Islamic world.³ Apart from these socio-cultural beliefs, there is a daunting gap in the country's public and private healthcare providers' supply and services.⁴ Many low-income classes stubbornly refrain from using birth control to accumulate maximum earning hands. Unfortunately, due to the turndown of simpler and cost-effective birth control routes, a large number of women are forced to go through

abortions. In fact, as many as 4 million unplanned pregnancies occur every year in Pakistan, resulting in around 2.2 million abortions.⁵

Family planning could go a long way in ensuring the well-being of both mother and children along with securing women's autonomy. It allows women to pursue higher education and participate actively in various public issues, which, on the contrary, becomes difficult for young mothers who are forced to drop out after conceiving. These limitations have been proven to be addressed through adequate funding, policy making and advocacy for safe birth controls.⁴ As concerned health authorities and stakeholders come together to spread awareness among the masses through active campaigning, it can be achieved.

It is imperative that health professionals and policy makers play a primary role in fostering safe sex practices to combat health-related and social disadvantages. Family planning is more cost-effective for families who otherwise focus on the ephemeral benefit of reproduction. Smaller families can also pay attention to raising their children more efficiently. Several NGOs such as Rahnuma, the Marie Stopes Society and the Family Planning Association of Pakistan (FPAP) are currently working to curb this threat.⁴ The common goal of these NGOs is to raise awareness of family planning methods and to train midwives and lady doctors who can provide guidance on the timing and spacing of pregnancy, condom use, oral and emergency contraceptives, intrauterine devices, etc. Community leaders and religious scholars should mobilize to break barriers and assist in the use of contraception.

The benefits of family planning have lasting impacts on the health and well-being of the larger population, which should remain a goal to achieve in Pakistan.

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