


## Talk with Experts i

**“But given that almost all Islamic countries including Saudi Arabia, Iran and Indonesia have much lower fertility, we cannot keep bringing in religion as the main factor”**



 **Zeba Sathar**

*Zeba Sathar is a senior associate and directs the Population Council's office in Islamabad, overseeing technical assistance and capacity building, social science research, and population and demographic dividend research that informs national policy discussions and developments. Her expertise include cross-national comparative research, advocacy for policy change, analysis of demographic trends and patterns, and evaluations of health service delivery systems.*

**Q.** Though contraceptive use increased sharply between 1990 and 1998 (12% vs. 28%), fertility rate was declining, but the success was short-lived. Only a third of currently married women are currently using any contraceptive method and TFR has stalled close to the mark of 4 births per women. What went wrong? Why Pakistan could not sustain the momentum?

**A.** The period 1990-98 presents us with definitive evidence that change in reproductive behavior can happen sharply and in unprecedented ways in Pakistan. You rightly point out that the change was not sustained beyond 2000. The last twenty years mark a period of very slow change in fertility and contraceptive uptake. The fall in fertility rates of almost 6 children per woman on average to 4 births per woman, mainly occurring in that decade, can be ascribed to a revival of the population program and a clearly enunciated support for family planning services. The commitment was translated into investment in the Prime Minister's program for Family Planning and Primary Health care in the form of 100,000 lady health workers providing services to the doorstep. That clarity of intent has certainly not been seen since then. In fact the Population Policy 2002 formulated during that period of optimism regarding trends of population changes predicted replacement fertility by this year 2020. Pakistan could not sustain the level of change due to many factors but primarily a policy where women's health, family well being and children's health including their chances of survival through childhood are at the core of this loss of momentum. Usually, once fertility transition begins just like mortality transition, it does not reverse but stalls do occur and we are in a twenty year cycle of minimal change. Fertility rates have only declined by 11% in 2000-2018(18years) compared to 40% from 1991-1998 (8years).

**Q.** Given the consistent rise in the religious factor, a continuation of male dominance, and unabated illiteracy, what prospects exist in Pakistan for fertility decline?

**A.** Religion, male dominance and illiteracy can all be part of the explanation for the slow fertility decline. But given that almost all Islamic countries including Saudi Arabia, Iran and Indonesia have much lower fertility, we cannot keep bringing in religion as the main factor. Male dominance and the weak status of women to take decisions regarding their own family life, welfare and well being has certainly hampered reproductive change. While our research shows that men are increasingly supportive of spacing and fewer children, they have largely been left out of informational campaigns and services. Efforts to influence them has been absent. Above all, Pakistan does stand out most among the three factors that you propose in its very poor progress in eliminating illiteracy. While there have been improvements certainly, they too have stagnated with widespread illiteracy among males and especially females. I would say that if we merely addressed this, if primary education was universal, as mandated in the Constitution then fertility levels would definitely be much lower today.

**Q.** Why have Pakistan's family planning policies not been so successful? Does Pakistan need a family planning policy?

**A.** Pakistan does have a policy position about the population size and growth rates in the CCI (Council of Common Interests) Decisions of 2018. However, ambivalence in certain circles continues. If we clearly support a lower population growth rate as stated in the CCI decisions of 2018 which is our effective population policy then we have to do more to resource it and implement the decisions clearly laid out in a blueprint before the Federal and Provincial task forces with goals for 2025 and 2030.

population policy then we have to do more to resource it and implement the decisions clearly laid out in a blueprint before the Federal and Provincial task forces with goals for 2025 and 2030.

**Q.** Fertility decline is essential for demographic dividend. With high and almost stalled fertility rates, do you think Pakistan can realize the opportunity for demographic dividend?

**A.** The demographic dividend is a combination of an opportunity in the form of favorable age structures where a large size working age population reduces consumption and increases savings leading to an economic boost. However, and very importantly, it's an opportunity that has to be accompanied by equivalent opportunities in providing sources of livelihoods and jobs that absorb the expanding size of the labor force. This has not been the case, and our slow and sluggish economic growth of the last decade has failed to retain employment at earlier levels, alone absorb the 3 million a year new entrants to the labour force. The later fertility decline has merely extended the window of the demographic opportunity, but for it to be anything close to a dividend we need economic growth of 5% or more.

**Q.** Is women's empowerment in a patriarchal and a predominantly rural society possible? If not, is there still reason to believe that women in Pakistan could become equal in deciding what their optimal family size should be? If so, how could this be achieved?

**A.** All societies change and so do patriarchal societies and rural societies transform to more urbane lifestyles. The US has transformed from an agricultural society and Japan is a patriarchal society with transforming societal structures. So Pakistan will change too, perhaps slowly, but it will transform. And so will the roles of women in becoming slowly more involved in the labour force and in public life. In the period 1990-2000, female labour force participation rates remained at 13% or less and rose to 24% in the period 2001-2015. This again demonstrates that what we consider unchanging can alter quite fast. There is a strong desire among younger women to contribute to household income, to work outside the home but the barriers are huge, and there are simply not enough opportunities for young men, leave alone women. But as in the case of Bangladesh and the garment sector, you may find the same in our textile industry. Allow women better conditions and you will see a huge jump on paid employment that can have an extraordinary impact and spin offs for fertility.

One of the strongest relationship is between women's empowerment and contraception: those women who make three major decisions (what are these three decisions???) about their life are 50% more likely to use contraception, than those who can make none of these three major decisions according to the PDHS 2017. And those women who do paid work are more likely to make these decisions.

**Q.** Media is an important channel to put across your point. However, in case of Pakistan, debate on high population growth and its implication is generally missing. In what way should we communicate with the media, and how should we approach it, specifically? How can we sustain communication with the media?

**A.** Media is an extremely powerful way of changing points of view. We have been working with the media but their interests are transitory, depending on the main news stories. So we have to generate research and draw attention to issues that affect people. Unfortunately, high levels of unwanted pregnancies, maternal deaths and unwanted children are not news catching, But there are creative ways to draw in the media and this is an art. I think it is very important to change public opinion to endorse ideas and to put pressure on government to provide services. This is precisely what we are doing to promote the New Population Narrative. This Narrative was developed as one of the major decisions under the CCI.

**The New Population Narrative** is to ensure a balance between resources and size of population. "Parents have the right to freely and responsibly decide the number and spacing of their children so long as they can fulfill the fundamental rights of their children and their family by maintaining a balance between family size and their resources. The Government and society have the responsibility to help parents achieve this balance."

1. What should we tell our people to do in order to bring down the high fertility rates?

I think we have to convince people that a balance through three year spacing endorsed in Islam and by health experts will ensure the well being of mothers, children and the family. And the number of children that families plan have to ensure all rights of children. The role of the State is to ensure that whichever child is born they must have their rights fulfilled regardless of whatever numbers but they must provide information and quality services to all citizens.