

# Success story of Morocco *Africa*

By Zubeida Mustafa

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MOROCCO won the country award for 2004 given by the Population Institute, Washington, annually to the country whose population programme has shown good results in the preceding year. Morocco was adjudged the best, and if any proof of this were needed, it is expected to show in the report of the census held recently in that country. The report will be released shortly.

The census commissioner stated that he had the preliminary findings of the census. The comprehensive results will come in several months later. The results indicate that Morocco's population growth rate is down to 1.6 per cent. It was 1.9 per cent previously. Even the total fertility rate (the average number of children a woman in the reproductive age-group is expected to have) is down to 2.1 in the urban areas as compared to 2.5 in the rural areas. This was 6.9 in the seventies. Urbanization is taking place rapidly and today 60 per cent of Morocco's population now lives in towns and cities. In that case, the population growth rate will fall further.

The moot question is: how Morocco, a North African Muslim country of 32 million, has managed to achieve this miracle? A visit to this beautiful country which touches the Mediterranean in the north and the Atlantic Ocean in the west was a learning experience. If only our policymakers demonstrated the same political will as the Moroccans have displayed, many of our problems would have been resolved.

The two key characteristics of the Moroccan programme are its holistic approach to the

adopted a law on women which should, if implemented in earnest, transform their situation radically. It fixes the minimum marriage age for women at 18, prohibits polygamy, and gives the woman the right to ask for a divorce and keep the custody of the child.

Concurrently, primary education for girls is being promoted in a big way. Nearly 85 per cent of primary educational institutions are in the public sector and are mostly co-ed. The one I visited on the outskirts of Marrakesh in a low income area was a girls school that enrolls students till the high school level. It was a pleasure to meet the students and the staff. The standards appeared to be pretty good — at least to me as I can only visualize the ramshackle government schools with rundown furniture which I have seen in Pakistan.

It is not just the education of women that is having an impact on the demographic scene of Morocco. The students attending schools are exposed to health education and the hazards of Aids, drugs and smoking while they are familiarized with small family norms. Encouraged to do research on these subjects in their school health clubs under the guidance of their counsellors the mental horizons of these young ladies are being dramatically widened.

The raised status of women and education when combined with poverty alleviation have created an impact on population indicators. With less than two per cent of the people living on less than a dollar a day and 82 per cent having access to improved water supply, the population programme doesn't face the hurdle of poverty as it does in many other impoverished societies.

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are its holistic approach to the socio-economic sectors and its explicit and candid style in promoting information, communication and education about birth control, HIV, AIDS and reproductive health. Both have helped, and it is not possible to address only one of these dimensions and produce results. They are so inter-related and inter-connected. Take the case of the status of women, literacy and poverty in this country. By focusing on these primarily, the government has managed to give a remarkable boost to the quality of life as well as the population programme.

Dr Fatima Mernissi, Morocco's most well known feminist writer and sociologist, who wrote her famous book *Beyond the Veil* in 1975, now confirms that women have come a long way since then. True, there is still violence against women but the Moroccan woman of the 1940s, whose life Mernissi captured so vividly in *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Childhood* is not the norm today. Nearly 39.4 per cent of women over 15 are literate and the female literacy rate will jump further in another six years as the girls who are nine today become adolescents of 15. The primary school enrolment is nearly hundred per cent.

Moreover, two significant measures have been taken in the last two years which will, in due course, change the status of women in the country. King Mohammad VI, the young ruler of Morocco, has taken measures to integrate women in the policymaking machinery of the government. By introducing a law reserving seats for women in the parliament, he has ensured the entry of 35 women in the Assembly in 2002, when there were only two women MPs before.

Nouzha Skalli, a dynamic parliamentarian who won the Global Leader's award, and her colleagues have certainly taken up their responsibilities with great commitment. Last year, the Moroccan parliament

A key factor in the success of any population programme is the strategy adopted. The Moroccan Family Planning Association is bold and candid in creating awareness among the people and this campaign is underpinned with a wide network for contraceptive services. Adolescents and women are the key targets and culture is fully used to spread the message. Street theatres, songs and dances are freely used to educate people about sexually transmitted diseases and the importance of spacing deliveries and limiting family size.

The contraceptive services are so widely dispersed (the main methods being the pills, condoms, and injectibles) that the contraceptive prevalence rate is nearly 50 per cent and the unmet need (that is women who want to limit their children but do not have access to contraceptives) is less than 20 per cent.

The main question that came to my mind was how the religious leaders had responded to family planning. Even before I could ask, I had the answer. As I reached the office of the Family Planning Association in the old city of Marrakesh, I noticed a signboard in close proximity to the FPA's office entrance announcing that next door were the premises of a Quran school. I could hear the children chanting the verses of the Holy Book. Later, our hosts informed us that they engage the ulema in discourses on the subject and there are many religious leaders now speaking in favour of family planning in their sermons.

The fact is that religious scholars all over the Islamic world have categorically stated that Islam does not ban family planning. Even in Iran which is a theocratic state, the family size has been drastically reduced under the patronage of the government. In Morocco, with its liberal and moderate perception of Islam, it is not surprising that the family planning programme has faced no serious challenge from the clergy.