**[Population, gender & austerity](https://www.dawn.com/news/1742435/population-gender-austerity)**

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LEADING economists of Pakistan say that ‘population explosion’ is one of the biggest — if not the biggest — economic challenges facing the country. Pakistan has the fastest-growing population in South Asia with a fertility rate that is almost twice as high as that of India, Bangladesh and Nepal.

A rapidly growing population of course puts strain on limited resources and is, therefore, a cause for serious concern. But Pakistan’s ‘population explosion’ is not only a development issue — it represents grave human rights violations. Unwanted pregnancies seriously diminish the well-being of women and girls, while exposing them to maternal health risks due to the poor availability of quality obstetric care services.

To address the ‘population explosion’, we must understand the cause. Pakistan’s failure to stem its population growth rate is a symptom of steep and persistent gender inequality. That Pakistan is the second-worst performing country in the world in terms of gender parity (it ranked 145 out of 146 countries in the last World Economic Forum gender parity report) is an indication of the cause as well as a consequence of the high population growth rate.

Countries that have successfully reduced fertility rates did so by investing in women’s agency and empowerment. Education and employment opportunities that promote women’s awareness and decision-making capabilities around their reproductive health lead to increased use of family planning methods.

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A good example is Bangladesh, which has made significant strides towards gender equality in the last few decades: the gender wage gap in Bangladesh is among the smallest in the world, and more girls than boys attend secondary schools. In contrast to Pakistan’s fertility rate at 3.6, Bangladesh’s fertility is two births for every woman.

To address ‘population explosion’, our state must adopt policies and programmes that promote women’s agency and decision-making capabilities. There are many obstacles to achieving this, including deep-seated patriarchal traditions and misplaced government priorities.

The distortion of religion in Pakistan has played a role in stigmatising family planning methods. In the 1960s, founder and leader of Jamaat-i-Islami, Maulana Maududi, declared that the government’s family planning programme was against Islam. Although a vast majority of religious scholars agree that birth control is consistent with Islam, confusion about religious permissibility regarding family planning persists.

Another significant barrier to reduced population growth rates are the economic austerity measures adopted by Pakistan in exchange for IMF loans. Austerity measures involve reduced public sector spending and an increase in regressive taxation. Pakistan has adopted these policies for years to meet IMF conditions in exchange for financial support.

The impact of IMF-backed austerity measures on women empowerment is well documented. The global organisation, ActionAid International reports that “[w]omen, who do a vast majority of both unpaid care work in households and low-paid care work in public services, bear the brunt of austerity measures, especially public sector funding cuts. When public services are underfunded there is a triple disadvantage for women, who disproportionately lose access to services, lose opportunities for decent work and take on rising burdens of unpaid care work”.

Spending cuts that target sectors key to human development will harm women and girls disproportionately. Investments in health and education are necessary to achieve gender equality. Not only do women and girls need better access to health and education services, it is these government departments that tend to hire women and offer employment in the formal sector. Pakistan’s Lady Health Workers programme initiated in the 1990s is an example of a policy measure with the potential to improve women’s access to reproductive health services, while offering good jobs to women from rural and low-income communities. However, the Lady Health Workers continue to struggle for regularisation of their employment and living wages, even as the state compels them to divert their energies away from family planning to polio vaccine drives that put them at grave physical risk.

Provincial and local governments are best placed to implement health and education policies that would promote gender equality. Indeed, development economists have repeatedly emphasised that decentralisation is key to improved development outcomes. Therefore, reducing provincial allocations in the NFC award would prevent implementation of policy measures that promote gender equality and by extension lower population growth rates.

The IMF requires the imposition of regressive taxes and increased utility surcharges that inevitably place immense burdens on poor households, disproportionately impacting women and girls who also bear the chief burden of unpaid care work. Meanwhile, its demand for exorbitantly high interest rates stifles economic growth and reduces prospects for job growth, thereby reducing opportunities for women in the formal sector.

Just as detrimental is the fact that IMF conditionalities do not address the fact that the Pakistani state is essentially a ‘security’ state, where economic investment is skewed towards those sectors that advance the interests of the military and civil bureaucracy — such as real estate — rather than industries that would spur exports and offer formal sector employment to women. In other words, the very conditions that the IMF imposes keep its indebted countries in the debt trap.

While a decrease in spending is often proposed as a key to get out of the debt trap, we have to be careful about what we choose to decrease. Reductions in defence expenditure and non-development expenditure are necessary — however, a decrease in spending on health and education coupled with measures to privatise these sectors will disproportionately impact the lower-income populations, while preventing women and girls from accessing the resources they need to make decisions about their reproductive lives.

A combination of neoliberalism, patriarchy, militarisation and religious extremism — forces that complement each other and work together — are the factors behind Pakistan’s population explosion. There isn’t much point in raising the alarm on population explosion unless we acknowledge and develop a plan to tackle the underlying causes.

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