**[Growing millions](https://www.dawn.com/news/1786011/growing-millions)**

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ONE of the major factors contributing to the environment crisis in Pakistan is the unbridled population growth rate. Environmentalists generally focus more on issues such as climate change and global warming caused by carbon emissions, which are the result of industrialisation, deforestation and water mismanagement. It must, however, be noted that rapid population increase is at the root of all these evils. Moreover, it also has a negative impact on human development, both individually and collectively.

More shocking than the country’s astounding fertility rate is the government’s indifference vis-à-vis the demographic problem. We are way behind many developing states that have a phenomenal record in curbing their population growth rate. We are the fifth most populous state in the world today. I believe this is the major cause of our underdevelopment as it is not possible to meet the basic needs of the whopping numbers who constitute Pakistan today, plus the six million or so who join their ranks every year.

The census in 2023 recorded our population at 241m, an increase of 33m in just six years since the previous head count of 2017. The growth rate was 2.55 per cent. Unless drastic measures are taken the numbers will grow. As Thomas Malthus has reminded us again and again, population grows geometrically while food production increases arithmetically. If this pattern continues for too long then famine, conflict and epidemics intervene to restore the balance.

To give one an idea of how this is reflected in the people’s lives take a look at this data. Today, the Total Fertility Rate (the average number of children that married women of reproductive age have) stands at 3.6. It should be 1.9 if we want our population size to be stationary. The contraceptive prevalence rate is 34pc, which includes the 10pc who claim to use conventional methods that are not reliable. Worse still is the high unmet need of 17pc, denoting couples who do not want to have more children but do not have access to contraceptives. The government has failed in all respects due to a lack of political will, corruption and ineptitude.

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Also at work is the planners’ inability to understand the relationship between family planning and the empowerment of women. The fact is that underpinning our population programme is the low status of women in Pakistan. That creates pressure on mothers of girls to continue bearing children until two sons are born. Sons are regarded as status symbol for a family.

Interestingly, some NGO members in the family planning sector tell me that the latest trend among women who have had some education and are working is to opt for a small family, even if it means forgoing sons. The problem is that even these women generally have no control over decision-making in their homes and are as powerless in the latter as they are in society. Hence their wish with regard to family size does not prevail. It seems so unfair that women have to submit to their menfolk’s diktat even though the burden of pregnancy and child-rearing falls on the mother.

Yet our population planners are blind to this new trend. Small wonder the focus is heavily on women who are at the receiving end of all counselling on the use of contraceptives and the importance of planned families. Why are men not mobilised and made aware of how our rapidly growing population is creating problems for them as well as for the country?

There is growing evidence that mindsets can be changed by talking to people and giving them the space to talk about their views regarding their problems and how they can be resolved. This dialogue is important if solutions to people’s problems are to be found and awareness created. True, these are issues of a very personal nature but they have a direct bearing on people’s lives.

Hence the need of the hour is to make the subject of family planning a priority and part of the national discourse. Its implications must be discussed freely in all private and public forums. The focus should be on the 6m babies born each year. They have basic rights which neither the state nor the parents can fulfil. That makes their lives brutish. The newborns add to the backlog of poverty, illiteracy and disease, and also make development an impossible task. Ironically, this is happening in a country that is already child-unfriendly and where children are maltreated and abused.

Were the caretaker government to launch a national discourse on the population issue on various public platforms and get population departments to pull up their socks, a useful beginning could be made.

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