

# We should be worried about the present fertility trends



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Bangladesh has a population of over 170 million. With an annual population growth rate of around one percent, about two million new faces are being added to the population every year. The population size will likely stabilise at around 240-250 million, if fertility can be brought down soon to below replacement level.

Being the most densely populated country in the world, Bangladesh is at a great risk of reaching saturation in terms of agricultural production and capacity to absorb further population increases into the rural labour force.

During the 1960s, fertility was high, with the total fertility rate (TFR) of over seven. It remained above six until 1981. Between 1989 and 1993-94, fertility declined sharply from 5.1 to 3.4. However, the decline was stalled at around 3.3 during 1994-2000, but then it declined sharply to 2.3 in 2011. However, it has remained at that level since then. Thus, Bangladesh has been experiencing stalling in its fertility decline since 2011.

The stall, which began in 2011, lasted for a 10-year period, ending in 2022. The increase in contraceptive prevalence rate (CPR) slowed and, indeed, almost stalled on account of the weakening of the family planning (FP) programme efforts, as the initial enthusiasm and political support waned. Since fertility stalls result in postponing the achievement of a level of fertility that is expected as well as desired, their occurrence is at the very least disconcerting.

Bangladesh received global recognition for its speedy fertility decline during 1989 to 1993-94 and 2000-2011. However, the stalling of fertility decline during 1994-2000, and especially since 2011, has become a matter of serious concern and several factors

contributed to that. One of those factors is the decline in percentage of currently married women wanting additional children. The desire to limit childbearing declined from 65 percent in 2011 to 57 percent in 2022, indicating an increase in the desire for more children.

Slower decline in child mortality in recent years is another factor. Child mortality declined substantially over the past two and a half decades; however, the decline has slowed down in recent years. Between 1993-94 and 2017-18, the under-five mortality declined from 134 to 45 and the infant mortality rate (IMR) declined from 88 to 38. However, declines were notably slow between 2017-18 and 2022, with the under-five mortality rate declining from 45 in 2017-18 to 31 and the IMR from 38 to 25.

The slowing down in the rate of increase in CPR is also a matter of concern, given the need to accelerate CPR to achieve the desired reduction in fertility. Family planning (FP) programmes achieved commendable success until 2011, with CPR rising from around four percent in the 1960s to 62 percent in 2011. However, it has remained almost unchanged (64 percent in 2022) at that level since then.

There is also a shortage of staff, including trained ones, at different levels of FP programmes, such as family welfare assistants (FWAs), family welfare visitors (FWVs), nurses, and doctors. In addition, absenteeism of providers at different levels has been commonplace. Furthermore, there is conflict between medical and non-medical personnel and between cadre and non-cadre personnel within the Directorate General of Family Planning (DGFP). Added to the HR problems are the lack of effective monitoring and supervision, and lack of transparency and

accountability. The number of home visitations are not enough as well. One-fifth of currently married women reported a visit by a fieldworker in the past six months in 2014, and it remained unchanged in 2017-18 (data for 2022 is not available). This represents a sharp decline from 43 percent in 1993-94.

Plus, there has been a decline in the relative share of long-acting or permanent method (LAPM) of contraception from 47.8 percent of

dependent on temporary modern methods, is the high rate of discontinuation, implying huge system losses for the programme. Around half of the users stop using a method within 12 months of starting its use because of method failure, side effects, health reasons, or because they want to become pregnant. Dropping out on account of side effects and method failure indicates that FP services are of low quality.

There is also a relatively high unmet need

inadequate staffing, lack of a regular, reliable and uninterrupted supply of contraceptives, inadequate behavioural change through communication messages, lack of strong technical and managerial leadership, and the limited role of NGOs and the private sector, except the Social Marketing Company (SMC). All these result in a general lack of access to good-quality FP services, especially in the low-performing areas, including urban slums.

The transition from declining fertility to its stalling should act as a signal for policymakers to do something new or strengthen existing efforts so as to restart fertility decline. This will require a strong and sustained political commitment to address the problem, and that is absent. As an example, the Population Policy of 2012 has not yet been updated even after a lapse of 12 years, reflecting a lack of commitment on the part of the health ministry. There is no doubt that the Bangladesh Family Planning Programme has lost much of the focus and priority it received until the mid-1990s. To fully achieve its development objectives and bring about the desired reduction in fertility levels, the government should attach high priority to the FP programme (especially giving top priority to high-parity couples, and give greater focus on acceptance of LAPM).

Hence, there is clearly a need to develop a supportive and proactive policy environment by sensitising the political leadership and other stakeholders about the dangers of the fertility stalling in the country. Also, there is a need for a more inclusive strategy, involving greater involvement and participation of all concerned ministries, especially the local government ministry that is entrusted with the responsibility of providing FP services in urban areas, NGOs, the private sector and professional groups. The political leadership should renew its commitment to contain the rate of population growth, as it had until the mid-1990s, instead of putting the issue on the backburner. Therefore, responding to the signal will require, among other things, rejuvenating and strengthening the FP programme, bringing about substantial rise in female ages at marriage and childbearing, increasing female schooling and employment, and improving child survival rates.



One of the factors causing stalled fertility is the decline in percentage of currently married women wanting additional children.

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modern method use in 1994 to only 14 percent in 2022. Global experience shows that the most successful FP programmes are characterised by considerably high use of LAPM. The change in the contraceptive method mix has implications for the FP programme's overall sustainability. The decline in the relative share of LAPM should be of concern, since most childbearing is completed by the mid-to-late 20s, and women face two subsequent decades of reproductive life during which they must protect themselves from unwanted pregnancies.

A key concern for FP programmes, overly

for contraception. In 2022, the unmet need for contraception was 10 percent, but if users of traditional methods (nine percent) are considered, the total unmet need for modern methods was 19 percent. Besides, exposure to FP messages in the mass media among women aged 15-49 years has also declined. For example, the percentage of women who saw a FP message on television declined from 24 percent in 2011 to 16 percent in 2017-18 (data for 2022 is not available).

FP service delivery, too, suffers from various constraints. These include, for example, inadequate funding by the government,

# Exploring a new political paradigm



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Welfare of the people is an indicator of a nation's success. In the 2024 World Happiness Index, Bangladesh ranks notably low, even falling behind Pakistan. In the Atlantic Council's freedom and prosperity indexes, which cover 164 countries, Bangladesh secured the 141st spot in the Freedom Index this year, better than only Afghanistan in South Asia. Despite achieving a relatively better position in the Prosperity Index, Bangladesh's overall classification still remains "Mostly Unprosperous."

In recent decades, we have witnessed a consistent decline in the Freedom Index, contrasted with an upward trend in prosperity. This apparent paradox has confused many, yet the explanation is not so puzzling: the responsibility for ensuring freedom depends on state institutions, which have failed, while economic prosperity has predominantly stemmed from the endeavours of people, who have succeeded.

Foreign remittances from both official and unofficial channels amount to an impressive \$45 billion annually. The multiplier effect of money translates that into approximately \$135 billion of economic activity or about 30 percent of the GDP. Without the efforts of overseas workers, garment employees and farmers, this nation would have still remained a "bottomless basket." Rampant corruption, absence of the rule of law, obstacles to doing business, and poor governance have all contributed to state institutions being perceived more as hindrances than promoters of economic progress.

Given its favourable demographic dividend, fertile soil, abundant freshwater, ample rainfall, sufficient sunlight, and extensive coastlines, Bangladesh possesses all the ingredients to emerge as one of the happiest and most prosperous nations, provided that the rule of law and good governance are firmly established. Although various stakeholders—politicians, business

leaders, bureaucrats, intellectuals, and professionals—may share responsibility for the current predicament, the ultimate hope for overcoming the nation's challenges rests with the people, guided by an effective political culture.

Political philosopher Hannah Arendt conceived of politics not solely as the exercise of power, but rather as revolving around the concept of "active citizenship," emphasising civic participation and people's deliberation on all issues. The primary objective of politics should be to foster "active citizens," who possess civic knowledge, political consciousness, and the capacity to fight for justice. Political culture should aim to foster such a depth of socio-political awareness that even the most corrupt, self-interested individuals recognise that prioritising the common good over personal gain ultimately serves their own interests and the well-being of their children.

To enable the one-sided flow of wealth, the British Raj established an oppressive class known as the Zamindars, supported by a coercive bureaucratic system. The Indian Congress that emerged in late 1800s was primarily composed of the elite classes, perpetuating the deeply entrenched colonial system that prioritised the interests of the ruling class over those of the populace. Similarly, Pakistan and later Bangladesh followed a comparable trajectory. Networks of exploitative politicians, dishonest business figures, and corrupt officials continued to exploit the nation reminiscent of colonial practices.

The resolution hinges on dismantling this nexus and restructuring all state institutions. However, two significant hurdles obstruct progress. Firstly, over time, this network has amassed such influence that it is nearly impossible for any political party to gain or sustain power without its backing. Secondly, once in office, enacting comprehensive reforms in



VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

the state apparatus carries inherent risks, such as adverse economic repercussions, which dissuade governments from taking decisive actions.

The sole remedy lies in empowering the populace through political leadership deeply connected to them. The political entity must adhere to democratic principles in selecting its leaders and maintain a decentralised party structure. Units at both union and upazila levels, guided by the overarching strategic vision of the central leadership, should have autonomy in recruitment, training, fund management, and the coordination of social movements. The goals encompass, initially, advancing civic and political education within communities to cultivate active citizenship; secondly, nurturing grassroots leadership; and thirdly, engaging individuals in political, social, and environmental movements. The existing "patron-client" leadership model, characterised by blind followers, must be supplanted by a democratic framework grounded in the principles of "servant leadership." This philosophy, introduced by organisational theorist Robert K Greenleaf in 1970, traces its origins to earlier concepts, as expressed by Guru Nanak, "The one who serves the most deserves to lead."

Success of any social movement depends on people's participation. Sir Paul Collier, professor at Oxford University, proposes that people are

chiefly driven by their self interests. When individuals believe that joining a protest outweighs the risks and offers substantial benefits, they are inclined to participate. Another demographic comprises those who have endured severe injustices from the present system and seek reforms. The third segment includes individuals propelled by genuine patriotism. It is crucial for leaders to understand and

utilise these fundamental aspects of human psychology.

Politics is warfare without bloodshed. Targeting areas of least resistance is one of the winning tactics depicted in Sun Tsu's *Art of War*. Accordingly, initial social movements could be confined to local areas and issues where resistance from the government machinery would be minimal. As people become more

organised and confident, attention can gradually shift to tackling deeper-rooted issues and expanding efforts to regional and national levels.

Social movements sometimes can become violent. But they can be confined to peaceful means. For instance, consider a protest against an upazila medical officer who neglects duties at a public hospital while running a private clinic. If he cannot be held accountable through administrative and legal channels, other peaceful methods, such as boycotting his private clinic or denying him essential commodities and services in the locality, can compel him to comply. Given everyone's reliance on society, any individual or entity can be forced to heed public demands through such social actions.

This is not a blueprint for quickly seizing state power, however. Overhauling the entire system and political culture is an immense undertaking that requires unwavering dedication, akin to the sustained commitment seen in our preparatory phase of independence movement, which lasted roughly 18 years (1952-1970). With more than 40 political parties in Bangladesh, I hold onto the hope that certain existing ones, or perhaps new entrants, will ultimately adopt a long-term political agenda rather than succumbing to short-term opportunistic goals.

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