

Women's Empowerment and Population Stabilization Go Hand in Hand

In Afghanistan, girls who attend school risk becoming victims of acid attacks, which can permanently disfigure their faces and hands—the only parts of their bodies that may be exposed in public. The Mirwais School for Girls in Kandahar recently experienced one such attack in which 15 girls were burned. One 17-year-old girl named Shamsia suffered burns so bad she had to go abroad for treatment. She is now afflicted by vision problems and unsightly scars on her eyelids and left cheek, which will eventually require plastic surgery.¹

The Taliban banned girls from attending school in 1996. Though they were ousted from power in 2001, their legacy (and some of their willing thugs) remains.

With little opportunity for life outside marriage and family, the fertility rate in Afghanistan is 6.8, the highest in the region by far. Girls are married off young, usually to much older men. In fact, 57% of girls in Afghanistan are married before they turn 16. Being pregnant and giving birth before physical maturity can be very dangerous. That, coupled with a lack of trained reproductive health professionals, leads to some pretty dire statistics. Unsurprisingly, infant and maternal mortality rates are much higher in this troubled country than in any other Western or Central Asian country.

Millennium Development Goals

When multilateral agencies like the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, or the World Bank fund development projects, they are guided by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Adopted in 2000, the MDGs set ambitious targets for eradicating poverty and hunger, reducing child mortality, and improving maternal health by 2015. One of the key MDG objectives is to achieve

universal access to reproductive health and family planning services.

Millennium Development Goal Three is to promote gender equality and empower women. Specifically, one target is to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education. In sub-Saharan Africa and Western Asia, only 89 girls attend primary school for every 100 boys. The statistics are even worse for secondary school. School attendance, especially that of girls', is highly correlated with household income. The wealthiest girls have nearly the same attendance rates as the wealthiest boys.

Joel Cohen, Professor of Population Studies at The Rockefeller University and author of *How Many People Can the Earth Support?*, recently wrote in the journal *Nature*, "Education promotes a shift from the quantity of children in favor of the quality of children. This transition reduces the future number of people using environmental resources and enhances the capacity of individuals and societies to cope with environmental change."

Bob Engelman, Vice President of the Worldwatch Institute, echoes this sentiment in his book, *More: Population, Nature, and What Women Want*. The answer to what women want is not "more children, but more for their children."

Reducing maternal mortality is Millennium Development Goal Five. Recently added as part of the strategy is to achieve universal reproductive health by 2015. In sub-Saharan Africa, a woman's chance of dying of a preventable pregnancy or childbirth-related cause is 1 in 22. With odds like that, having children is a death sentence. This statistic is made much worse by the fact that many of the deaths are due to early marriage and short birth-spacing. Children born 3 to 5 years after a previous birth are about 2.5 times



Girls attend school in La Blanca, Guatemala. This one-room schoolhouse accommodates 72 students. Photo: Marian Starkey

more likely to survive than children born 2 years after a previous birth. Similarly, women who deliver at least 27 months after their previous birth are 2.5 times more likely to survive childbirth.

Family Planning Stabilizes Population

A key component allowing women to control their own lives is to give them voluntary access to contraceptives and other family planning resources. When women are given the resources to make informed, voluntary decisions about the number



A young Rwandan mother and her child.
Photo: Eileen Dietrich, Courtesy of Photoshare

and spacing of their children, they usually choose to have smaller families. For most people smaller families allow for greater investment in each child, healthier mothers and children, and better prospects for the future. But above all, the ability to plan a pregnancy makes it easier for a woman to go to school, work, care for her family, and contribute to her community.

Unfortunately, millions of women lack access to contraceptive information and services. Approximately 200 million women in the developing world would like to delay or avoid having a child but lack effective contraception.

Educational Opportunities Open Doors

Education empowers women and girls to plan their lives. Not only are educated women better equipped to understand their reproductive health options, but they also have greater social and econom-

ic opportunities that may lead them to have smaller families. Studies have shown that literacy, especially reading comprehension, profoundly impacts family size. Of the nearly 1 billion illiterate adults worldwide, two-thirds are women living in South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East. In 29 countries, less than 30% of women can read. Sadly, 75 million children of primary school age are not in school, including one-third of the relevant age group in sub-Saharan Africa.

The longer a girl or woman extends her schooling, the longer she delays having children, usually decreasing her lifetime fertility. A more educated woman is also more likely to find economic opportunities outside the home.

Gender Equity

Years of research have demonstrated that when the status of women advances, population growth slows, and the quality of life improves for everyone. The lower social status of women in many places bars them from having control over their own lives and bodies.

Across the globe, societal norms and laws deny women access to education, health services, political participation, and economic opportunities. If society limits a woman's opportunities, parents with inadequate resources will not invest in a daughter's future, and she will have no options beyond marriage and childbirth at a young age. In addition, women's relative powerlessness to refuse sex or negotiate safe sex, especially in the context of marriage, leaves women vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies.

Male Participation and Education

Men's attitudes toward family size and reproductive healthcare have a significant impact on the well-being of women and families. When men want more children than their wives, women often face pressure or coercion to become pregnant, especially in abusive relationships. Positive, supportive male attitudes and male participation in reproductive decision-making are just as important as women's roles in achieving population

How You Can Help

- Ask your members of Congress to support a doubling of international family planning funding to \$1 billion, the amount needed to eliminate unmet need for contraception around the world
- Join Population Connection's Email Action Network. Visit our website at www.populationconnection.org

stabilization. Men and women must work together as equal partners to make informed decisions about sex, reproductive healthcare and family planning.

Women's Empowerment: A "Population" Issue?

Women's empowerment and population stabilization go hand-in-hand. And we know that when women are empowered to improve their own lives, they tend to have smaller families, and population growth slows. When population growth slows, governments and families can more easily invest in opportunities for women and girls, and women can more easily invest in opportunities for themselves and their families.

As John Seager, the President of Population Connection, says, "In addition to the enormous benefits to individual women and families, efforts to expand access to education, economic opportunity and family planning provide broad social benefits too. That's why it's so crucial that governments make a strong commitment and dedicate the necessary resources to the work that remains to be done."

¹ Filkins, Dexter "Afghan Girls, Scarred by Acid, Defy Terror, Embracing School" *The New York Times*, January 13, 2009.

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Population Connection is America's largest grassroots group advocating for progressive action to stabilize world population at a level that can be sustained by the Earth's resources.