

## PAKISTAN'S POPULATION EXPLOSION AND THE YOUTH BULGE

By

**Mir Sher Baz Khetrn**

*Research Fellow*

*Centre for Strategic Perspectives (CSP), ISSI*

Edited by

**Dr Neelum Nigar**

**November 7, 2022**

*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



### ***Introduction***

Pakistan is globally recognised as a country facing challenges in controlling its population growth. Its alarming population growth rate of 2.4pc per annum, which translates to between 4m and 5m children being added to the total each year, is no less than an existential threat.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, there still appears to be no well-thought-out and cohesive population control program in the offing. With shrinking resources, Pakistan's population is expected to increase from 2.4 to 2.8 which is an alarming trend. The government must address the issue by using all means.

The rapid growth of the population also poses serious risks to internal security. At 230m people, Pakistan is the fifth most populous nation in the world and is on track to around 300m by 2030. The National Security Policy announced at the beginning of 2022 rightly recognised human security as a precondition for internal security.<sup>2</sup> But nothing more has emerged on that score. The government needs to involve the media in creatively furthering the narrative about the benefits of limiting family size. That must be backed up with access to dependable family planning services through the public healthcare system. A recent major study jointly undertaken by several international organisations including WHO found that women in Pakistan have an estimated 3.8m unintended pregnancies each year, most resulting from unmet need for modern contraception. The data also showed that 52pc of

<sup>1</sup> 'The People Bomb', *Dawn*, May 14, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1699549>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

married women of reproductive age who want to avoid pregnancy are not using a modern contraceptive method. We are now faced with a perfect storm. Inadequate investment in education and poor economic growth have generated enormous resentment and anger among a youth cohort that sees few prospects for advancement amid contracting employment opportunities. The effects of climate change are bearing down unmistakably upon us, and making scarce resources even more so. Unpredictable weather patterns and rising temperatures are adversely affecting harvests and exacerbating food insecurity. Population pressures also leave us much more vulnerable to international developments such as the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war that disrupt global supply chains. Shortages of water and electricity have already begun to spark unrest; the smallest provocation, it seems, is enough to trigger mob violence in a people whose patience has been stretched thin by poor governance, rising inflation and urban crime.

### ***Social and religious factors***

Pakistan's birth rate has remained high and the contraceptive prevalence rate is lower than neighbouring countries with similar or worse socio-economic conditions. In Pakistan majority considers birth control wrong and un-Islamic and that family planning is a Western convention that offends Islam.<sup>3</sup> Government has to engage the clergy to sensitise the people about birth control and the benefits of the small family and learn from Bangladesh where the Bangladeshi government engaged religious people and was successful in controlling the birth rate.

There is social and family pressure in Pakistan and family planning is frowned upon. Moreover, in a poor household, every person in the family needs to be engaged to earn income for the family. This leads to less focus on the well-being of the children whose health and education are neglected as a result.

### ***Urban management***

The movement towards the urban centres of a country has been found to be a common element in regard to population dynamics. These dynamics however have a significant economic, cultural, political, and social impact on the lives of not only the migrants but also the place of destination. Migration from rural to urban centres is a common phenomenon observed in the population all across the world and especially the developing countries. There are a number of reasons that lead to this migration, primarily to find better sources of income. Similarly, there are a number of consequences of the rural to urban movement as Pakistan's urban population continues to increase.

---

<sup>3</sup> Julie Mccarthy, 'In Pakistan, Birth Control And Religion Clash', NPR, August 10, 2011  
<https://www.npr.org/2011/08/10/139382653/in-pakistan-birth-control-and-religion-clash>

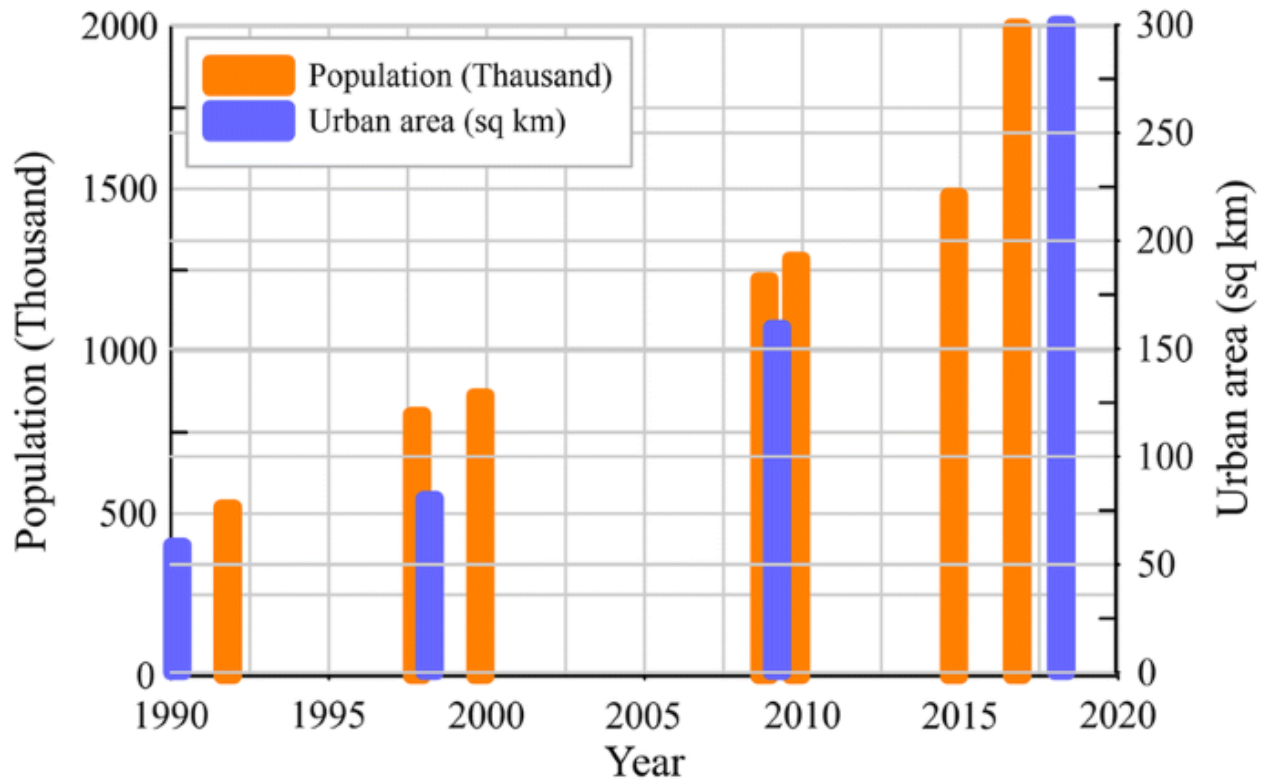


Figure: Urban growth sustainability of Islamabad, Pakistan, over the last 3 decades

### ***Bangladesh: A Role Model in birth control***

Bangladesh has shown remarkable progress in population control and made outstanding progress in population control. It is now a role model in the world.

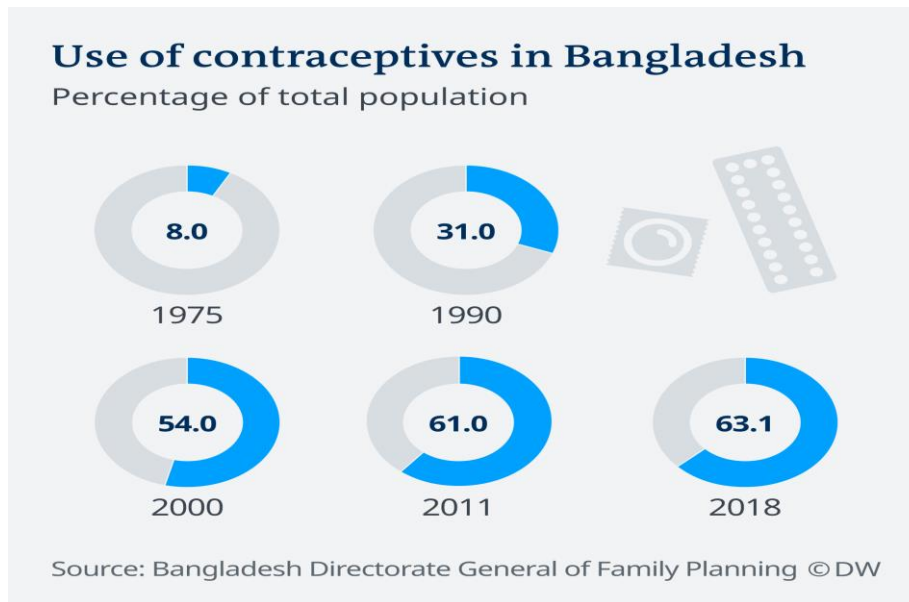
The annual population growth rate in Bangladesh has declined from 2.77 percent in 1961 to 2.13 percent in 1996, further reducing to 1.03 percent in 2020.<sup>4</sup>

Bangladesh has brought down the fertility rate from about seven births per woman to 2.1 births per woman, which is almost the European average, over the past 50 years. Bangladesh has invested heavily in family planning methods and services. Every eligible couple receives information about family planning methods from local health workers, which help reduce population growth.

The success of the population control strategy is reflected in the fact that the number of people using contraceptives has gone up from 8 percent in 1975 to 54 percent in 2000, 61.2 percent in 2011 to over 63 percent in 2018.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Rajesh Jha, 'Bangladesh a role model in birth control', DD News, August 27,2021  
<https://newsonair.com/2021/08/27/bangladesh-a-role-model-in-birth-control-health-minister-zahid-maleque-2/>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



To reduce population growth, Bangladesh has been providing free contraceptives to women for decades. Regular birth control pills are particularly popular among women in the country, where many men still opt out of using any contraceptives during sexual intercourse.

### ***Youth bulge***

Pakistan's population comprises 63% of youth aged between 15 and 33 with limited opportunities to achieve their full potential.<sup>6</sup> Ideally, the developing and developed nations both are hunting for young people which are engines of growth and progress for them but here in Pakistan the situation is otherwise. Instead of being an asset they have become liabilities as we have not been able to use them to our advantage owing to lack of investment in education particularly the vocational one, chronic inability of the state to produce employment opportunities, undernourishment & malnourishment leading to stunted mental and physical growth, and absence of well thought out policies to exploit their potential and accommodate them afterward. With an unemployment rate standing at 8.5%,<sup>7</sup> highest in the region, dissatisfaction among youth is brewing at a much higher rate than before to be further exacerbated by the current economic downturn. Additionally, with the lowest female labour force participation rate we are confronted with a daunting challenge to create 1.3 million additional jobs every year. The refusal to allow women to get an education further complicates the situation where the majority faction of society is ousted from the job market to start with. This is a very dismal picture indeed. Simultaneously, there is a pressing need to invest in relevant fields of the contemporary age including but not limited to Artificial Intelligence (AI), IT,

<sup>6</sup> Ahsan Kamray, 'Youth bulge in Pakistan: bane or boon?' *The Express Tribune*, July 14, 2021  
<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2310476/youth-bulge-in-pakistan-bane-or-boon>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Graphic Designing etc. This failure to effectively accommodate the youth bulge has led to an abject wastage of talent besides youth gravitating toward extremism and terrorism posing a serious threat to the country's security.

### ***Conclusion***

The government has to educate people about family planning and incorporate population growth and family planning into political and economics courses in high school and college; incorporate population control into national economic plans; advocate for two children per couple; and establish a permanent population committee to plan, develop, and implement population policies and related research.