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To What Extent can the Positive Masculinity Approach Contribute to the Population Control Program in Bangladesh?

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Abstract- This significant success in Population Control Program (PCP) in Bangladesh has surprised many researchers both inside and outside of the country. But still, there is a major gap related to the involvement of men in the program. As the Bangladeshi community is patriarchal and most members are conventional, it is therefore assumed that the participation of men in PCP is incompatible with manhood. This paper is an attempt to argue that men's involvement as a tool of Positive Masculinity approach can contribute to the PCP in Bangladesh. It also aims to show the significance of Positive Masculinity in PCP to lessen the burden on female lives and to dispel the ignorance surrounding male roles in PCP.

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To What Extent can the Positive Masculinity Approach Contribute to the Population Control Program in Bangladesh?

Muhammad Abdur Raqib

Abstract- This significant success in Population Control Program (PCP) in Bangladesh has surprised many researchers both inside and outside of the country. But still, there is a major gap related to the involvement of men in the program. As the Bangladeshi community is patriarchal and most members are conventional, it is therefore assumed that the participation of men in PCP is incompatible with manhood. This paper is an attempt to argue that men's involvement as a tool of Positive Masculinity approach can contribute to the PCP in Bangladesh. It also aims to show the significance of Positive Masculinity in PCP to lessen the burden on female lives and to dispel the ignorance surrounding male roles in PCP.

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Introduction

Since the adoption of the Population Control Program (PCP) in 1976, the total birth rate of Bangladesh declined from 6.5 to 2.1 in 2016, while the contraceptive prevalence rate increased from 7 to 62.3 (BBS, 2016: 83). This significant success in PCP has surprised many researchers both inside and outside of Bangladesh. But still, there is a major gap related to the involvement of men in the program. As the Bangladeshi community is patriarchal and most members are conventional, it is therefore assumed that the participation of men in PCP is incompatible with manhood. Although a few men in Bangladesh have already adopted the birth control procedures, the majority of Bangladeshi men are totally reluctant to use these methods, as Hossain (2013) indicates "against nine women in the country, only one male adopts a birth control method. Though the family planning system increased the user rate, the participation of the male did not increase in that way".

Although some hegemonic masculinists argue that women oriented PCP will lead to a great success to women lives and to wider society, others take a different view and claim that adopting birth control methods by men is much easier than by women and has no side effects at all. This paper is an attempt to argue that the Positive Masculinity approach can contribute to the PCP in Bangladesh. It also aims to show the significance of Positive Masculinity in PCP to lessen the burden on female lives and to dispel the ignorance surrounding male roles in PCP.

In order to demonstrate this, this essay will first focus how the hegemonic masculinist attitude to the PCP in Bangladesh leads to formulate women oriented PCP. Many masculinists are against the participation of men in the PCP because, as a man, his primary duty is to be involved in the productive role, not to be involved in family planning issues. This essay will argue that there is no contradiction between performing both roles. Second, it will focus on the perspective of Islamic religion towards gender role in order to show that Islamic teachings encourage the male to participate in the reproductive role. Third, the discussion will develop to show that although Bangladesh is a patriarchal country where it is assumed that only PCP should be women-centered, there is social change and this change is often supported and encouraged by the government and non-government organizations (NGO). Thus, it will be shown that, on a practical level, the idea of Positive Masculinity is essential to confront the success of PCP and to minimize the burden of women.

A key reason for targeting women in PCP as primary subject is the hegemonic masculinist understanding of reproductive roles. The idea of masculinity is the social construction of manhood. Though it changes across time, place and culture, its hegemonic aspect justifies men's dominant position in society and legitimizes the subordination of women (Connell, 2005). Therefore, In Bangladesh, it assumed that only women will perform the reproductive activities i.e. adopting the birth control methods, and rearing the children, while men will only be responsible for income related activities. In addition, Bangladeshi men are not traditionally aware of their reproductive health (Hussain et al., 1996). They assume that they will dominate in all aspects of the decision-making process in the family and society. So, the social construction of manhood in Bangladesh is based on the position of hegemonic masculinity, which tries to control over the women's decision in PCP.

Although the Hegemonic Masculinity perspective focuses on the responsibility of women to the PCP in Bangladesh, the Positive Masculinity

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approach is different. The Positive Masculinity approach purports that men can also take part equally with women in PCP by proposing there is no basis that men will lose their manhood if they would adopt a permanent birth control method. They argue that the success of PCP is not possible without the active involvement and support of men. Failing to reach men in PCP will lead to derailing women's position in the family. Therefore, Male inclusion in the PCP is not about granting privileges to women while disempowering men, it is about creating a more socially just program.

A key argument for men's participation to the PCP in Bangladesh that, Islamic teaching encourages the male to participate equally with women in all reproductive activities as well as it permits men to practice contraception. For example, one of the followers of the Prophet (Peace be upon Him), Jabir said, "We used to practice '*azl* (coitus interruptus) in the Prophet's lifetime while the Qur'an was being revealed. News of this reached him and he did not forbid us" (Wensinck, 1960:112). In this citation from the *hadith* (stories), Prophet Muhammad allowed Muslim men to adopt birth control method. Although there is no single opinion on birth control methods within Islam, eight of the nine classical schools of Islamic law including *Hanafi* school permits it (Atighetchi, 1994). As the majority of Bangladeshi people follows Hanafi School, it is clear that adopting birth control method by men is practicable in Bangladesh.

Despite this perspective on the issue of PCP, the patriarchal Bangladeshi Society considered that Islam focuses only on the women in reproductive issues and encourages women to have more children. Hegemonic masculinists think it is not acceptable in Islam for men to adopt birth control procedures and they build their argument on Islamic teaching that Islam advocates for high birth rates. They argue that the woman is responsible for child rearing and therefore man should not participate to the PCP.

Their argument on Islamic teaching towards population control issues is parochial. As Mamdani (1972) points out, that the condition of family planning in any society depends on the social structure and the pattern of production relations in that specific society. That is why, while many nations are encouraging high birth rate e.g. Russia and Scandinavian Countries, others like China and India are trying to control it. As Bangladesh has a high density of population, where 160 million peoples live within only 50,260 sq. miles' area, influences its state apparatuses to take necessary steps for PCP. Therefore, in the Islamic perspective, over and above *Hadith*, Wensinck (1960) points out a sufficient number of *hadith* where Prophet directly allowed the methods of birth control. Furthermore, birth control methods for men in Islamic medicine has been known for centuries - for instance, the Muslim writers Avicenna (980-1037) and Al-Razi (923 or 924) refer to different methods of contraception for both women and men (Nathan, 1991 and Yarmohammadi, 2103).

Therefore, it is clear that focusing only women in reproductive activities is built from a cultural perspective, not on religious instruction. On many occasions, people entwined the religion with the culture, especially regarding women's issues. Hence Turabi (1991) makes the point that women's issues in Muslim society are often mistakenly connected to the Islamic teachings. Thus, these arguments clearly show that there is much support for men to participate in PCP.

A further reason why men should participate to the PCP in Bangladesh is that there has already been a significant cultural change in gender relations within the Bangladeshi community. Indeed, because of the development in production relations and influence of globalization, it is difficult for any society to preserve its tradition and customs. Especially the emergence of the global women's movement since last centuries has resulted to rethink the role of men and women in all societies. Therefore, state apparatuses, as well as various international and national organizations, have taken several policies and programs on gender issues which have led to reshaping the role of men all over the world. In addition, the internet and satellite communications have also reshaped gender relations in various programs on different communities and customs. The influence of these programs is observed clearly in the changing role of men in all societies. Furthermore, increasing women's participation in the labor force and education sector in Bangladesh has compelled the men to rethink their attitude towards women.

A clear example of this change can be seen in the contraception campaign promoting no-scalpel vasectomy (NSV) by a renown NGO Engendering Health through two forty-second television advertisements targeted to married men. Other renowned NGOs e.g. BRAC, Eminence, also reformed their PCP targeting the female as well the male. Therefore, the Bangladesh Government also reformulated its population policy in 2012, where for the first time it highlighted the role of men in reproductive activities. Changes in the outlook of government and NGOs to the PCP resulted positively on men's participation. As Mohsin (2009) points out while only three men adopted birth control methods against 1500 women in 2009, the ratio between women and men in 2013 reached 1:9 (BBS, 2016). So, it is clearly demonstrated that even in a patriarchal community such as Bangladesh it is possible for changes in gender relation to make successful PCP.

Indeed, men's participation in the PCP is important for lessening women's burden. In Bangladesh, the government, as well as the donor agencies, have developed the women focusing PCP through a hegemonic masculinist approach which in worst cases leads to fatal consequences on women's

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lives. Akhter (1995:120) argues that the PCP was implemented to increase the power of the Population controllers and multi-national companies, and therefore, it did not allow the women to control their fertility. Akhter's argument can be accepted through examining the nature of the development of contraceptive methods in Bangladesh; out of seven methods, five (Ligation, IUD, Norplant, Injection, and Pill) were developed to target women without considering women's health and their social condition. Furthermore, Akhter's study (1995:181-194) also revealed that many women in Bangladesh were sterilized and experimented on using Norplant without their knowledge and consent, even IUDs and injectable technologies were in mass use before the trial of the method was completed, which resulted in serious health problems to many women. Therefore, expert reports indicate that all of the methods used by women have some side effects such as – cancer, breast tenderness, headaches, changes in mood, increases in weight, acne, nausea, lowering the amount of menstrual cycle, loss of sex drive etc. ('Contraception Guide', 2014). Thus, it can be clearly seen that the PCP in Bangladesh was gender-biased and to some extent exploitative against women.

However, on the other hand, common contraceptive methods for men are comparatively easy. Out of two methods for men, one is knife-free vasectomy (NSV) taking only a few minutes of short surgery which has minor side effects. Another temporary method, using condoms has no side effects ('Contraception Guide', 2014). But men are totally unwilling to use the contraceptive, so this socially constructed concept can be changed. As Hossain (2013: 24) points out, "If any couple wants to take permanent method then it is best to take the husband. While women have to cut the stomach during the adoption of a permanent method, in terms men it is much easier". So, the participation of men in birth control methods will definitely reduce the side effects of women.

Conclusion

It can clearly be seen that Bangladeshi men can largely contribute to the PCP. Despite the fact that some people argue that PCP should be formulated through targeting the women because of the cultural construction of gender and religious instructions, this essay has shown there are no theological impediments to the involvement of men. Considering the cultural context, it also shows that the attitude of hegemonic masculinity can be changed. Furthermore, it is clear that positive masculinity approach towards PCP is, in fact, necessary and beneficial for both women and men in the society. Indeed, this essay has demonstrated that many ideas and perceptions of Bangladeshi men have changed from the past to today, which suggests development in this area may be possible.

Currently, many national and international organizations are trying to convince the society about the importance of Positive Masculinity in PCP but nonetheless, as this essay has shown, there are serious obstacles. Although it is difficult to imagine the shared role of men in PCP immediately, the situation is certainly hopeful and suggests that masculinist attributes may be changed positively in the future.

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