

## **Looking After Existing Lives or Bringing New Lives in the World?**

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One big trend and dilemma amongst an average family in a Pakistani rural set up is frequent and repeated child bearing. It is appalling to see women bearing pregnancy as well as looking after their other small children and the entire household.

Khalida is my maid's daughter who got married at an early age, as is typical of the uneducated strata. Within the first five years of her marriage, she has had two daughters, one son and two miscarriages. Her life is full of hectic demands that are made on her by her household, her children and their needs. She admits that it all becomes overwhelming for her. Now her mother in law is demanding that she produces a son. This obsession with having sons is very common in Pakistani rural society. Disaster struck Khalida again when she recently became pregnant.

Closely linked with the problem of repeated pregnancies is the desire for large families and particularly the obsession with having a male heir. It is not uncommon to hear of families trying again and again, just to have a male child. This practice is tied to family pressure.

Another factor which contributes to the poor health of women, particularly in relation to reproduction is the lack of a sufficient number of paramedical and medical staff in the rural areas both in the private and the public sector. In order to overcome this problem and reach women and children at the grassroots level, the Government initiated a cadre of Lady Health Workers (LHWs) in rural areas in 1984.

Infant mortality is also an outcome associated closely with the trend of repeated child bearing, this trend leads to a disastrous decline in the health of women which in turn, adversely affects a women's health during subsequent pregnancies.

A draft report on the *Situational Analysis of the Status and Quality of Women's Health Care in Pakistan* (ADB, 1997) gives details about maternal deaths as follows:

A total of about 30,000 women (1 in every 38) die each year due to pregnancy-related complications. It is estimated that for every maternal death that occurs, 10 to 12 times that number become disabled for life due to inappropriate care during pregnancy.

Repeated and frequent child bearing exposes women to high levels of deficiencies in their bodies which make them weak. In addition, their bones become brittle and their immunity level falls. Not only do their bodies do not get enough time to recuperate but looking after so many dependent and small children also affects their mental health. It is amazing to watch women, who possess a delicate and feminine constitution, emerge to be so much more tolerant and composed at such turbulent times of their lives.

The situation regarding frequent child bearing in urban areas and the cities of Pakistan, is fast improving through measures like Family Planning and increase in contraceptive prevalence rates. The Pakistan Contraceptive prevalence Survey (1994-1995) indicates contraceptive prevalence has increased from 11.8 percent in 1991 to 17.8 percent. In Pakistan, the total fertility rate has fallen from 6.1 per family in the early 1990's to 5.4 but still exceeds the average for low income countries.

Education helps to keep frequent child bearing practice low in urban areas. Thanks to the spread of education, women become aware of the risks that could confront them if they did not space their pregnancies. Having established a reasonable gap, she can prepare her body and mind to give birth to another baby.

In Pakistan, the situation in cities is quite different and women do not go through repeated pregnancies as much as rural women do. In my opinion, we need to help change the outlook of those members of our society who believe that women are there only to reproduce at whatever stage or age of their life.

Assisting the creator in bringing a life in the world is a beautiful privilege. However, women also need to value their own health and life. Frequent and repeated child bearing results in disastrous after effects for a woman's body, mind and spirit.



A typical evening scene in the lives of Khalida's family members.



Frequent pregnancies does not lift the work load. This has a disastrous effect on a woman's life in the rural set up of Pakistan.



Khalida attending to her routine chores.