Women and the population problem

Alexandria Regional Centre for women’s Health and Development
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I congratulate the organizers for selecting the theme of this year’s conference to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the historical ground breaking Cairo International Conference for Population and Development which was an inspiration for women’s health and rights.

I was prompted to prepare this talk when I saw a cartoon in a widely circulating Egyptian Newspaper.

The title below in the picture is “about the increased number of births”. Two pregnant women are shown squeezing development by their swelling bellies. The message puts the blame squarely on women for hindering the development of the country with their excessive childbearing. It is not fair and it is not correct. It is not fair because women cannot get pregnant by themselves without a sperm donation from a man, i.e. unless and
until science advances to allow human cloning in the distant future. Then, men may be dispensable.

To put the blame on women is also not correct. To explain why and to get the record straight, let me share with you seven messages.

Women and the population problem

Seven messages

- Population size/ growth is one of four population issues in development.

Population size/ growth is one of four population issues in development
The first message is that population size and growth are important, but they are only one of four dimensions or issues in the relation of population and development.
Population and Development

- Population size/ growth
- Population distribution
- Population structure: Age and sex composition
- Population characteristics

The four dimensions are: Population size/ growth; Population distribution; Population structure: Age and sex composition; and Population characteristics.

Let me add that concern about population size and growth are not only about increase. Many countries in the world now are having the problem of decrease.

Go home and make babies

South Korea’s health ministry, which is charged with boosting the nation’s low birth rate, said in a statement Wednesday, that it is turning off the lights in its offices at 7:30 pm every third Wednesday in the month, to encourage staff to go home early and make more babies.

(International Herald Tribune, January 22, 2010)
There was recently a piece of news in the international press from South Korea, a country that is having now a very low fertility rate, and is striving to boost the nation’s low birth rate. The government came up with the idea of turning off the lights in the work offices so that people stop working, go home and make babies.

**Population growth is largely driven by the population momentum**

The next message, not widely understood, is largely driven by the population momentum. Let me explain.
Contrary to the impression given by the media, the total fertility rate TFR in Egypt is only 3. The TFR is an estimate of the number of children, on average, a woman is expected to have by the end of her reproductive career.

The contraceptive prevalence is 60 per cent. It is an estimate of the percentage of married women of reproductive age currently using a contraceptive method. This percentage is an under-estimate because the total of married women of reproductive age includes women who are infertile, pregnant or with absent husbands.

In spite of a fertility rate that is not high, a contraceptive prevalence that is no low, the population in Egypt is projected to increase from 84 million in 2010 to more than 125 million by the year 2050.

The explanation is the population momentum.
Population momentum

Population will continue to grow as more young people join the reproduction pool.

The population momentum implies that population will continue to grow as long as the number of young people who grow to join the reproduction pool is more than the number of older people who leave the reproduction pool.

Egypt youth structure

% of population Less than age 15

- Egypt 31
- More developed countries 16

(World Population Data Sheet 2013)
Egypt, as many developing countries, has a youth bulge in the population age structure: 31 percent of the population is under the age of 15, compared with 16 percent in more developed countries. These young people will continue to reach reproductive age and increase the number of people who reproduce. This is a general phenomenon in the demographic transition from high to low fertility. Let us look at another country, China, as an example.

### China (World Population Data Sheet 2013)

- % of married women 15-49 years old using modern contraceptive methods: 87
- Total fertility rate: 1.5

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<td>Population mid 2013</td>
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<td>Projected Population mid 2025</td>
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The contraceptive prevalence in China is the highest in the world, 87 percent. The total fertility rate is 1.5, lower than the fertility replacement level of 2.1, needed to stabilize the size of the population (two births to replace two parents, and taking account of child deaths). Even with this situation in China, the population is projected to add 50 million more people by the year 2025.

I remember discussing with Chinese colleagues what China will do about this.
They told me this is a crisis, and the Chinese language word for crisis is constructed by two components:  

wei and ji, “wei” meaning danger and “ji” meaning opportunity.

The demographic youth bulge

- A challenge
- An opportunity: The demographic bonus
The Chinese recognized the challenge of the youth bulge, but took advantage of the opportunity of a demographic bonus, when the country can benefit from mobilizing the productivity potential of young adult population.

**Women have an unmet need for family planning**

- Population size/growth is one of four population issues in development.
- Population growth is largely driven by the population momentum
- Women have an unmet need for family planning

The next message is that in spite of all the talk about population growth and the need for birth control, women continue to have an unmet need for family planning.
According to Egypt Demographic and health Survey in 2008, 9.2 percent of married women of reproductive age, who do not want more children, for now or at all, are not using a method for family planning.

Unwanted Fertility: The unmet need

The 2005 EDHS estimated that if unwanted births could be eliminated, the total fertility rate in Egypt (currently 3.1) would decline by around 25 percent.
The survey estimated that if these unwanted births could be avoided by responding to the unmet need of women, the total fertility rate in Egypt would decline by around 25 percent.

**Women have the highest stakes in the reproductive revolution**

- **Women and the population problem**
  - Seven messages
    - Population size/growth is one of four population issues in development.
    - Population growth is largely driven by the population momentum
    - Women have an unmet need for family planning
    - **Women have the highest stakes in the reproductive revolution**

The reproductive revolution from a large to a small family norm, and from fertility by chance to fertility by choice, allows women to be both producers and reproducers.
The reproductive revolution

Women are playing both a reproductive and productive role in their societies.

To impress this dual role of women, let me share with you this slide.

The lady was the defense minister of Spain in a government where half of the cabinet ministers were women. In the picture she is inspecting the military honour guard. She was seven months pregnant.
The reproductive revolution

- **Women** are playing both a reproductive and productive role in their societies.

- **Science** launched a woman-centered contraceptive technology revolution

The reproductive revolution also gave women another benefit, a woman-centered revolution in contraceptive technology.

Women, throughout history, have always sought means of contraception.
The ancient Egyptian woman is probably the first in historical record to apply a contraceptive method. The vaginal pessary is described in a papyrus paper more than three thousand years ago. It seems from its constituents that it was not without effect.

Now, thanks to the contraceptive technology revolution, Contraception has moved outside the bedroom, women have long acting contraceptive methods, effective and reversible contraception, and above all women-controlled methods, which women can use without the necessity of cooperation of their male partner.

Women are part of the solution, not part of the problem
Women and the population problem

Seven messages
- Population size/ growth is one of four population issues in development.
- Population growth is largely driven by the population momentum
- Women have an unmet need for family planning
- Women have the highest stakes in the reproductive revolution
- Women are part of the solution, not part of the problem

Because women have the highest stakes in the reproductive revolution, women are a part of the solution, not a part of the problem, of population growth. People of my age can look back on the evolution of thinking about how to look for a solution to the challenge of the population problem.

Population: A problem looking for a solution

- Bukharest 1974
  - Family planning is the solution
- Mexico 1984
  - Development is the best contraceptive pill
- Cairo 1994
  - Women are the solution
The United Nations International Conference on population convened in Bukharest upheld the slogan that “family planning is the solution”. Ten years later, the Mexico Population Conference raised the slogan that “development is the solution, “development is the best contraceptive pill”. The last conference, our Cairo Conference, 20 years ago, recognized the importance of family planning, and the importance of development, but it upheld the truth that “women are the solution”.

So, women are part of the solution. But they cannot be a part of the solution without having access to one universal prescription.

Women and the population problem

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- Women have an unmet need for family planning
- Women have the highest stakes in the reproductive revolution
- Women are part of the solution, not part of the problem
- The universal prescription women need

The universal prescription which women need is power.
A universal prescription for women

Rx

Power

Powerlessness of women is a serious health and development hazard.

Power: A universal prescription for women

Prescription Instructions

Recommended dose:
Take as much as you can get. There is no risk of over dosage.

Side effects: None reported
Supply: not available in pharmacies.

The prescription instruction for the recommended dose is to take as much as you can get. There is no risk of over dosage. No side effects have been reported. The problem,
however, is in the supply. It is not available in pharmacies. Women have to work to get it themselves, to be helped to get it, and to keep a sustainable supply of it.

Not all wanted fertility is really wanted by women. It would be wanted if women really had the power and the choice. When societies allow women only one choice in life, childbearing and childrearing, and make children the only goods they can produce and they are expected to deliver, fertility cannot be a real choice.

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Let me share with you two of my teaching slides which I use for my students in our noble women’s health profession.
We are unique among health specialties which deal different parts of the human body. It is our fate to work in a disputed territory of the body of the human female. A woman can claim the right to her head, hair, hands, arms, upper body, legs and feet. But a certain areas of her body is claimed by certain males of the species, moralists, politicians, lawyers, all of whom argue to decide on how this area is best utilized.

A woman is not a womb- A woman has a womb
The second teaching slide is to impress upon the students that a woman is not a reproductive system with a human face on top. A woman is not a womb. A woman has a womb. Reproduction is “a” function of women, not “the” function of women. Women badly need the “power prescription” because they suffer from a “power deficiency syndrome”, worldwide, but more in certain regions and countries.

Women’s power deficiency syndrome

- Less than 16 percent of the world’s parliamentarians are women
- Two thirds of all children shut out of school are girls
- Both in times of armed conflict and behind closed doors at home, women are still systematically subjected to violence.

UNDP 2011

A recent report from the United Nations Development Programme UNDP highlighted that less than 16 percent of the world’s parliamentarians are women, two thirds of all children shut out of school are girls, and that both in times of armed conflict and behind closed doors at home, women are still systematically subjected to violence. This is worldwide. Let us look at gender inequality in Egypt, compared with other countries.

The UNDP Gender Inequality Index is based on estimates of maternal mortality ratio, adolescent fertility rate, seats in national parliament, population with at least secondary education, and labour force participation rate.
In the report of year 2013, the rank of Egypt was 126 among 182 countries.

To empower women and give them back their God- given rights, we need to do better.
Let us face it. Discrimination against the girl child is still prevalent in many parts of the world, including ours.

The birth of a second girl child is not welcome, as shown in this picture, and as an attitude lamented in this verse of the Qur’an.

Discrimination against the girl child

"Leaders at all levels of the society must speak out and act forcefully against patterns of discrimination within the family, based on preference for sons."

This has prompted the Cairo ICPD to call upon “leaders at all levels of the society to speak out and act forcefully against patterns of discrimination within the family, based on preference for sons.”

Let me now put a question to you as my last message.

If you have only one dollar, where would you invest it in family planning? This question was actually raised during a gathering of old friends in my last visit to New York to receive the United Nations Population Award. We were all old timers, involved throughout our long career in family planning and contraception. One of us raised the question: Now that we are all retired, if we have only one dollar, where we will invest it in family planning. It was put as a multiple choice question, for which the answer has to be only one choice: development of improved contraceptive methods, improving access to effective modern family planning methods, expanding information and education for family planning, or other: Please specify.
Where to invest your one dollar in family planning?

Select ONE:

- Development of improved contraceptive methods
- Improving access to effective modern family planning methods
- Expanding information and education for family planning
- Other: Please specify

The first one in our group to venture an answer was the late Dr Sheldon Segal, best known for his work on the development of contraceptive implants which provide several years of protection against unwanted pregnancy.

Where to invest your one dollar in family planning?

- Development of improved contraceptive methods
- Improving Access to effective modern family planning methods
- Information and education for family planning
- Other: **Girl education**
His answer was: Other: Invest your only dollar in girl education. Out group, mostly biomedical scientists, all agreed.

Let me end, sharing with you another newspaper cartoon showing how women are unjustly blamed for the population problem.

The messenger is telling the lady: The Minister of planning is asking when are you going to stop childbearing, so that he can plan (for the country).
I suggest the good lady should answer back:
Women will be free from excessive childbearing when they are empowered to make the decisions in their reproductive life, when childbearing and childrearing are not made their only choice in life, when their needs for family planning are met, and when young girls are given the chance for completing education and gainful employment.

My final take home message:
Egypt has a population problem.
Take care of women and the problem will take care of itself