Bangladesh and Pakistan: Divergent Developments

Between Indian independence in 1947 and the end of the civil war (1965–1971) Pakistan and Bangladesh together constituted the state of Pakistan. Since they became two independent countries in 1971, their demographic development has been quite distinctive – and very different. In Bangladesh, total fertility rates (TFR) fell rapidly – from 6.9 children per woman in 1970–75 to 4.1 in 1990–95. A further drop to 2.2 has now brought the country close to replacement level. Bangladesh therefore today has a favorable age structure with a dependency ratio of below 66 since the beginning of the 2000s. This has opened a window of opportunity for a demographic dividend. In terms of the dependency ratio, Pakistan lags behind by about ten years. In Pakistan the TFR level remained high for twenty years after the war and declined by less than one child between 1970–75 and 1990–95 – from 6.6 to 5.7 children per woman. Since then the decline in TFR has been sharper, falling to a rate of 3.2 children per woman in 2010–15. As both countries share similar historical and cultural trajectories, the huge divergence in TFR decline must be traced to other factors, specifically the degree of political commitment to population issues and female participation in the labor force.

Political Commitment to Population Issues

In pre-war Pakistan, population growth was perceived as a threat to the country’s future. Hence, in 1965 a family planning program was launched, a highly innovative measure for the time. After the war, Bangladeshi policy makers continued to follow this path, whereas in Pakistan the political commitment to population issues was strongly reduced.

There are many reasons why population policy is part of the political agenda in Bangladesh. In a densely populated country destroyed by war there was an urgent need to adopt a development strategy designed to combat poverty and population growth. Politicians were convinced that the country would not be able to supply a growing number of people with food – a Malthusian viewpoint confirmed by the devastating famine of 1974. Population policies therefore became a high priority and were supported by a society that, following liberation, was open to new ideas and approaches.

What is more, the international donor community had a stake in policy planning and gave major support to family planning activities. As a result, every Five-Year Plan in Bangladesh has included a population component. The 1970s saw many steps designed to reach the goal of reducing population growth: the formation of administrative bodies (1975), the formulation of a National Population Policy (1976) and the establishment of a huge voluntary family planning program (1977), which today is regarded as one of the most effective programs of its kind in the world. Commitment since then has been continuous. What is more, NGOs strongly supported the government in implementing population policies and were central to the successful spread of family planning services in Bangladesh.

Another measure aimed at reducing population growth was to raise the level of primary and secondary education for girls. In 2009, primary education was close to universal for both sexes, whereas half of boys and girls received secondary education.

While population policies were favorable in Bangladesh, the opposite was true in Pakistan. There, the installment of a new political regime led to a break with pre-war policies including those on population issues. Furthermore, religious parties gained influence and managed to veto the attempts of subsequent governments to give priority to population issues. An evaluation of the earlier 1965 family planning policy also showed that it had yielded meager results, undermining the credibility of
attempts to reduce fertility rates. Nevertheless, in the first years after independence, the international donor community was still allowed to engage in family planning programs. These programs today are criticized as having been ineffective, since they focused on the large-scale distribution of contraceptives without paying sufficient attention to local peculiarities.

Education: Shooting Forward or Lagging Behind

Composition of the population in Bangladesh and Pakistan (2010) according to sex, age groups and educational attainments. (Data source: International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis [2007])
Various international political crises meant that the donors periodically refrained from supporting Pakistan from the mid-1970s on.\textsuperscript{xvi} They therefore lost their stake in pressuring the government to commit to population issues. And even in times when foreign support reemerged, Western actors’ influence on Pakistani policy makers was low owing to the country’s strong geostrategic position during the Afghanistan War in the 1980s.\textsuperscript{xvii} Although every Five-Year Plan since independence has addressed the question of population increase, it was not until the Sixth Five-Year Plan for 1983–87 that the government broadened the scope of its population policy and laid out elaborate objectives concerning population dynamics.\textsuperscript{xviii} NGOs, which were crucial to the developments in Bangladesh (as was the private sector), started to gain weight as distributors of contraceptives.\textsuperscript{xix} In 1990, the independent Ministry of Population Welfare was established, and a family planning program strongly resembling that initiated in Bangladesh in 1977 was launched.\textsuperscript{xx} Since then, commitment has remained high, resulting in various population policies as well as subsequent family planning and health programs.\textsuperscript{xxi} But whereas in Bangladesh a nexus was drawn between education, early age at marriage and at first birth and population growth, in Pakistan no specific measures were taken to increase girls’ school enrollment rates. The education system in Pakistan does not reach all girls on the primary level and is far away from providing them with secondary education.\textsuperscript{xxii}

The measures in Bangladesh were successful in raising the contraceptive prevalence rate (CPR), which has been steadily increasing since 1971 and reached 61 percent in 2011. In Pakistan, by contrast, the CPR even decreased during the 1970s and reached a low of 3 percent in 1980. Extended policy commitment was followed by a rise in contraceptive use to 14.5 percent in 1990. Since 1990 it has been unstable, oscillating between 12 and 32 percent. The latest level measured was 27 percent in 2008.\textsuperscript{xxiii} This shows that more still needs to be done.

**Participation of Women on the Labor Market**

The participation of women in the labor market is a contributing factor to the reduction of TFR and at the same time a result of lower fertility rates: With women pursuing a paid job, household incomes rise, reducing the number of children needed as social insurance and leading in turn to higher levels of education and lower child mortality.\textsuperscript{xxiv} On the other hand, women who have more children tend to work less.\textsuperscript{xxv} The activity of women on the labor market can hence be seen as an indicator of the initiation of a demographic transition. The female labor force participation rate (LFPR) in Bangladesh was 60 percent in 2012. Compared to 24 percent in Pakistan, this is very high.\textsuperscript{xxvi}
Employment no Secure Path to Pay

Composition of the female population according to status in employment in Bangladesh (2010) and Pakistan (2010-11). (Data source: International Labour Organization, Bangladesh Labor Force Survey [2010], Pakistan Labor Force Survey [2010-11])

The high degree of female labor force participation in Bangladesh can be traced back to the active commitment by NGOs as well as to the success of the ready-made garment (RMG) industry: in the 1970s NGOs started to encourage women to engage in self-employment by providing them with micro-credits. And the clothing industry has been growing as an employer since the end of the 1980s. During the 1980s Bangladesh was able to profit from less restrictive trade barriers on textiles, making the country an attractive investment location for RMG production. xxvii The industry predominantly employs young, unmarried women, who delay their marriages to work in the factories. xxviii Between 1980 and 2011 the number of jobs in the sector has grown from 40,000 employees to 4 million, 80 percent of whom are female. xxix
Working Women: Not Always the Usual Standard

Share of the female population of working age that is economically active in Bangladesh and Pakistan (1990-2012). (Data source: International Labour Organization [2013])

Although micro finance has spread throughout the developing world, it has been growing on a wide scale in Pakistan only since the beginning of the twenty-first century. And although the clothing industry is very important for the country’s economy, it strongly differs from that of Bangladesh. Pakistan mainly produces textiles rather than ready-made garments. In this part of the value chain, male employment dominates. Compared with Bangladesh, the share of females employed in the sector is therefore very low, and is estimated by the United Nations to be at around 20 percent. An alternative sector for women searching for work has not been established.
Endnotes


xi Data refer to gross enrolment rates as reported by the The World Bank (2012), World DataBank: World Development Indicators.


xix Data refer to gross enrolment rates as reported by the World Bank: The World Bank (2012)
Data refer to gross enrolment rates as reported by the The World Bank (2012), World DataBank: World Development Indicators.

The World Bank (2009), The Service Revolution in South Asia, Washington, D.C.


Unfortunately, labor force data in Bangladesh do not deliver precise information about the place of employment. Therefore, data presented here refer to Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (2012), BGMEA at a Glance.


Lopez Acevedo, G. and Robertson, R. (Eds.) (2012), Sewing Success?: Employment, Wages and Poverty Following the End of the Multi-fibre Arrangement, World Bank, Washington, D.C. The share is estimated to be higher.