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MEDIA CONCERN AND TRENDS OF FERTILITY IN BANGLADESH

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Abstract

This paper analyses how the media interprets Bangladeshi fertility trends by analyzing 11 online available articles from two Bangladeshi leading dailies, *The Daily Star* and the *Prothom Alo*. The exploration of the newspaper articles reveals that print media in Bangladesh has shown concern notably on the present scenario of the country's declining fertility trend. It has been observed from the newspaper clippings that both population growth rate and fertility rate are gradually declining in Bangladesh which they explain as a matter of great satisfaction. Drawing on examples from South Asia, the articles explain that Bangladesh has a remarkable achievement in fertility reduction compared to India and Pakistan. However, almost all of the articles have expressed concern over the population bomb of Bangladesh. The newspapers also report that though fertility is declining at the national level, significant variation exists at the regional level and among different socio economic groups. The fertility rate is reported to be very high in the urban shanties and poverty-stricken rural areas. In this regard, the clippings have often criticized the government activities, especially governmental population control programme.

Key Words: Media's Concern, Fertility Declining, Population Growth, Internal Migration, Political Leaders' Outlook

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Introduction

It is apparent from the existing evidence base that in recent decades, there has been a substantial decline in fertility all over the world. Indeed, during the past half century, the world observed a remarkable decline of fertility, from over 5 births per woman in the period 1950-1955 to 2.65 births in the period 2000-2005 (United Nations, 2005). However, declining fertility was firstly observed in the so-called developed

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countries, mainly in Europe. It has shown that whereas many of these countries experienced a “baby-boom” during the 1950s and 1960s, the decline started in the 1970s to below-replacement level (ibid). Since 2000, the 'baby bust' has replaced the 'baby boom' and later, this trend was also observed in other developed countries from Asia, North America, Australia, and some other parts of the world (Douglass, Carrie B. et al, 2005: 4). Whereas the number of countries with below replacement levels fertility was only 5 in 1960, these numbers have increased to 64 in 2000 (ibid). In fact, by 2005-2010, almost all developed countries had achieved fertility levels, below 2.1 children per woman; only two countries- Iceland and New Zealand- had fertility levels equal or just above 2.1 in this period (United Nations, 2013).

Majority of the developing countries have also experienced rapid fertility decline in recent decades. According to the United Nations' World Population Prospects (2012), in the last 38 years, since the first World Population Conference held in Bucharest, Romania, in 1974, fertility has declined by over 20 per cent in 150 developing countries and more than 50 percent in 40 of them. Overall, the total fertility rate (TFR) of the developing world dropped from 5.36 births per woman in the late 1970-1975 to 2.69 births in 2005–2010 (United Nations 2013). The most rapid decline has been observed in Asia, North Africa, and Latin America region where social and economic development has been relatively rapid and it also happened in some countries of Sub-Saharan Africa despite their lagging development (Bongaarts, 2008). Among the Asian countries, where fertility rate was greater or equal to 4 children per women in 1975-1980, the rapid fertility decline happened in Islamic Republic of Iran, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Lebanon, Mongolia, Viet Nam, Myanmar, Maldives, Bhutan, and Bangladesh (United Nations 2013).

Therefore, with regard to the fertility reduction, Bangladesh is one of those successful developing countries in Asia that are experienced with profound decline in the fertility rate since mid-seventies. Fertility has declined steadily over the years, from 6.3 children per women in 1975 to 5.1 children per women in 1989, 3.3 children in 1999/200 and 2.3 children in 2011 (BDHS, 2013). This declining fertility trend in Bangladesh has been seen as a historic record in demographic transition (Rahman and Razzaque, 2003). Many experts argued that the family planning programme of Bangladesh government has played a vital role in this rapid decline of fertility (e.g. Das Gupta and Narayana, 1997; Bairagi & Datta, 2001; and Rahman and Razzaque, 2003). The 2005 Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (BDHS) showed that

use of contraception among married women in Bangladesh has increased gradually- from 8 percent in 1975 to 61 percent in 2011.

As Bangladesh is a highly populous country, this rapid decrease in fertility is evaluated as impressive and very desirable by many researchers, academics and scholars. Indeed, with an estimated 164.4 million people (Farid et al., 2011: 121), it has become the seventh most populous countries in the world (Khan and Khan, 2010: 3), and at the same time it is one of the most densely populated country, excluding city-states such as Singapore, Bahrain, and the Vatican, with 1100 people living per square kilometre (Farid et al, 2011:121). It has been estimated that the present size of this population is likely to grow up to 177.9 million in 2025 and 201.9 million in 2050 (United Nations 2013). This projection is definitely a cause for concern as the country is poor, has the environmental deterioration, massive migration from rural settings to unplanned urban areas, and swift depletion of resources (Rahman and Razzaque, 2003). Besides, though fertility is declining at the national level, wide variations in fertility rates exist among the socio-economic groups and geographical regions (BDHS, 2013). Yet fertility rate is still high compared to the 'developed world'. This paper discusses how all these fertility related issues in Bangladesh are presented in the Bangladeshi media by analyzing some national newspaper clippings.

Media Interpretation of Fertility

One of the most significant current media concerns in the world is the fertility issue. While more and more press in developing countries address high fertility issues, national press in the developed industrial world is more and more concerned with the below replacement fertility. At the same time, this media presentation and interpretation of fertility has also become an important subject of study. Especially in the case of Europe, some scholars analyse how media presents the issue of replacement level fertility by analysing their national media. For example, Douglass, Carrie B. et al. (2005: 6-9) analyzes the media concern of Europe and identifies the reasons why countries are worried about the below replacement level fertility. Among repercussions of below replacement fertility they stress the negative population growth, emerging metaphors about a fear of national decline, changing age pyramid due to the population aging, and discussions on replacing international migration as a possible solution for negative population growth. In the case of Slovenia, Knežević Hočevar (2004) reviewed 177 newspaper articles from Slovenian press published between 1970 and 2000. The study showed that Slovenian media discussed at large fertility and migration issues in the period of proclamation of Slovenian sovereignty. She discovered that in the 1970s, fertility decline in Slovenia was mostly presented as a sign of cultural and economic

development. But during the 1980s, Slovenian newspaper articles presented some catastrophic headlines and the rate of immigration has been interpreted as a threat of 'vanishing of Slovenia'. Finally, her study revealed that about 70 percent articles published during the 1990s raised the issue of Slovenian fertility decline in public attention focusing the threat of numerical smallness, and xenophobic attitude towards immigrants. Moreover, in the case of the United Kingdom, Brown and Ferree (2005) insisted that British newspapers represent the issues of falling birth rate in a particular way as begging, lecturing, threatening and bribing the 'national population' for increased fertility.

As Bangladesh is an opposite case, being among the most densely populated countries in the world, it is expected that the media in Bangladesh is very much concerned with its present fertility trend. Perhaps they address several problems that tend to be alarming for the nation because of its present population size and at the same time some issues might be presented as a matter of great satisfaction as declining fertility is desirable for the country. Therefore, the main aim of the paper is to delineate how media interprets the present scenario of the fertility of Bangladesh by analyzing clippings from two leading daily popular newspapers of Bangladesh. Henceforth, the paper first points out how fertility is presented in the newspaper clippings in Bangladesh by analysing the salient features of the writings. Second, the discussion will turn to how journalists summarize the fertility and migration issues in Bangladesh. Furthermore, the analysis will go through the worries and the satisfaction presented by the clippings as to the fertility and population growth in Bangladesh.

Methodology

Media concern and trend of fertility in Bangladeshi is examined by reviewing 11 online available articles from two Bangladeshi leading dailies, *The Daily Star* and the *Prothom Alo*. All articles were published between the years 2010 and 2012. The majority of articles (10) are collected from the Bangladesh leading English daily, *The Daily Star* and its monthly publication – *Forum*; one article belongs to the Bengali daily the *Prothom Alo*.

Result and Discussion

The main Features of Newspapers' Talk

From the analysis of 11 reviewed articles, four main features are explored. These include (i) demographic trends and their causes, ii) trends of fertility, iii) fertility variation and its causes, iv) criticism towards

government activities and political leaders' outlook. The next section describes these salient features of the writings in details.

Demographic Trends and Their Causes: All newspaper clippings reviewed often express concern over the current demographic trends in Bangladesh. These articles describe a catastrophic outlook, emphasising the present scenario as alarming for Bangladesh. Reviewed articles assert that the long tradition of high fertility in the country is the main reason of such demographic trend. It has been presented that in Bangladesh, 1.8 to 2.0 million people are added to the total national population in every year (*Forum*, July, 2012). Though during the British period population growth rate was controlled due to high fertility and mortality rates, later on this trend increased due to decreasing mortality and continuing high fertility (*The Daily Star*, 8 July 2012). For instance, Bangladesh population rose by 242 percent between 1950 and 2000, and according to demographic projections it will increase by more than 50 percent between 2000 and 2050 (*ibid*). Accordingly, population will grow up to 180 million by the end of 2020, 220 million by the end of 2050 (*Forum*, July 2011), and 250 million by the year of 2081 (*Forum*, July 2012).

Discussing the causes of present trend of population growth, the articles also highlight the momentum between high fertility and falling mortality. These also stress on women who are in child bearing age that constitute a large proportion among the population. As one article stresses,

'The high population growth rate of Bangladesh is caused not only by current or high past fertility but also by the "momentum" created by the high fertility and falling mortality in the past five decades. Past high fertility and falling mortality mean that women currently entering the child-bearing age group constitute a large proportion of the total female population, and this proportion will continue to increase in this mid-century' (The Daily Star, 21 December 2010).

In sum, the articles report that population trend in Bangladesh is alarming as population is growing up rapidly.

Trends of Fertility: All the Newspaper clippings reported that over the years fertility trend is declining in Bangladesh. Clippings have shown that the TFR was nearly 7 in 1970 (*The Daily Star*, 8 July 2002). The TFR declined to 3 in 2004 and further reduced to 2.7 in 2007 (*Forum*, July 2011). Hence, overall the fertility trend is gradually declining in Bangladesh. The newspaper clippings also referred to the declining fertility trend, taking its examples from the household size in Bangladesh. For instance, while the household size was 5.5 persons per

household in 1991, the figure declined to 4.8 in 2001 and further dropped down to 4.4 in 2011 (*The Daily Star*, 8 July 2012). Some of them also claimed that Bangladesh is going to achieve replacement level fertility by 2015.

However, the clippings reported that even though the total fertility rate is declining over the year, adolescent fertility is increasing every year, as large numbers of young women are entering the reproductive age (*The Daily Star*, 21 December 2010). Therefore Adolescent fertility contributes much to the TFR. As it is mentioned in one of the article,

'Contribution of Adolescent Fertility to TFR rose from 20.8 percent in 1991 to 23.3 percent in 2007. The estimated number of women of reproductive age is 40.8 percent, and will rise to about 48 percent by 2021. The pace of momentum is being accelerated by the practice of early marriage of girls. According to the BDHS 2007, the female median age at marriage is 15.3 years. Whereas the legal age at marriage for girls is set at 18 years. The figures show that 68 percent of the adolescent girls are married by the age of 18, and 55 percent of them are becoming mothers before reaching the age of 19 years' (*Forum*, July 2012).

The newspaper clippings highlighted that, adolescent fertility is increasing due to the practice of early marriage in urban slums and rural areas particularly in the poor section of society and giving birth to child in early age as well as a large number of women entering reproductive age (*The Daily Star*, 11 July 2011; *Forum*, July 2011; and *Forum*, July 2012).

Fertility Variation and Its Causes: The reviewed newspapers also underscored the issue of fertility variation in Bangladesh. According to the interpretation in the news papers, though total fertility is declining at the national level, wide variations in the fertility exist among the geographical regions and different cross cutting socio economic groups. According to the articles, some regions of Bangladesh have already experienced the replacement level fertility, for instance, Khulna, Rajshahi, and Dhaka division, but other divisions such as Barisal, Sylhet, and Chittagong still have high fertility rates (*Forum*, July 2012). They have also shown discernible differences between rural and urban fertility rate. For instance, women in urban areas have 2.4 children, while that figure is 2.8 in the rural area (*Forum*, July 2011).

Fertility rate also varies within the region. Comparing urban areas, another clipping highlighted that fertility in slum area is higher (2.46) than that of non-slum areas (1.85). While non-slum areas' birth rate is 17.9

percent per 1000 women, in slum areas this rate is 23.8 percent (*The Daily Star*, 11 July, 2011). Besides, in slum areas, 64 percent of women have become mothers before reaching the age of 20, which is 44 percent in the non-slum areas and 45 percent in the district municipality areas (*Forum*, July 2012).

It has been shown that women's education is strongly associated with fertility. Women who have the low education have the highest fertility while the women with higher education have the lowest:

'Fertility also varies with mother's education and economic status. Women with no education have an average of 3.0 children compared to 2.3 among women who have completed secondary school or higher' (Forum, July 2011).

Besides, the clippings also highlight that fertility is also negatively associated with wealth. As it is mentioned in one of the article:

'Fertility also decreases with household wealth. The poorest women have an average of 3.2 children -- one child more than women from the wealthiest households (2.2 children)' (Forum, July 2011).

In sum, fertility varies in many aspects

Among the reviewed articles, some articles (e.g. *The Daily Star*, 11 July, 16 July 2011, and *Forum*, July 2012) also identify the causes behind the above mentioned variation in fertility rate. They all stressed that the slow progress of governmental family planning programme¹ is the main reason of this variation. According to the articles, poor women in rural areas and urban slum areas have little access to the family planning services provided by the government. For instance, in the six City Corporation, Government UPHCP (Urban Primary Health Care Project) programme covers only 25 percent of the urban population (*The Daily Star*, 16 July 2011). In the slums, women have little access to government services, and they are not provided free contraceptives. They have to buy those from the nearby drugstores (*The Daily Star*, 11 July 2011). As a result, they do not practice contraception seriously:

¹ Recognizing the importance of reducing fertility rates, Bangladesh Government took Family Planning Program as an official program since 1961 which deployed Family Welfare Assistant (FWA), initiated Social Marketing Program to promote contraceptive, encourage delayed marriage and other motivational and awareness program for population control (<http://dgfpmis.org/>)

'This 35-year-old mother is expecting her fifth in a couple of months. Jaheda, who lives on selling flowers, feels no charm in having a new member in the family; neither does she resent it. All she says, "It just happened." Her eldest daughter Hanufa gave birth to a child just last month. The government family planning slogans "Two is good enough--boy or girl" or "One child is good, but no more than two," did not work for Jaheda. especially the poor and slum dwellers are deprived of family planning services as the Urban Primary Health Care Project (UPHCP) lacks door-to-door family planning services' (The Daily Star, 11 July 2011).

On the other hand, some articles highlight that rural and slum women are still not fully conscious of birth control measures; especially some rural women view birth control as being taboo and they do not trust the government of Bangladesh's family planning programmes:

'Undeniably true, there is an element of cover up, taboo and a sense of shame in discussing sex and family planning even amongst adults in the villages. Presumably, no rural couple is going to opt for birth control if it means walking several kilometres to buy a packet of condoms' (The Daily Star, 16 July 2011).

In this case, the article criticizes the fact that government's grassroots level workers have a little work for these targeted women, especially given that they do not have any motivational and counselling programme for them (*The Daily Star*, 16 July 2011).

Criticism towards Government Activities and Political Leaders' Outlook: Bangladesh governmental population control programmes are often criticized by the newspapers. As observed from the previous section, some clippings stressed that the government family planning programme failed to serve the whole population as a lot of urban slum and poor women are excluded from it (*The Daily Star*, 11 July, 16 July 2011, and *Forum*, July 2012). Some articles express criticism in that the country is moving towards an uncertain future because of the present population trend yet the government has neither a specific plan of action nor the required allotments in the national budget (*Forum*, July 2011). On the other hand, two articles criticize the present prime minister and former prime minister of Bangladesh. Prime Minister Shekh Hasina stressed in her lecture given in the Parliament that the present population of Bangladesh was not a problem for the country. Rather it should be seen as a possible transfer into skilled manpower (*Forum*, July 2011). The article argues that the Bangladeshi prime minister is not aware of the present population trend and its consequences:

'...in the Parliament, what the honorable Prime Minister said is really frustrating. She neither considers the population of one of the most highly dense countries of the world as a burden, nor is she concerned about the high growth rate of its population.'

Besides, another article (The *Daily Star*, 6 June 2012) made a headline on the demographic vision of Khaleda Zia, a former prime minister and present opposition leader. The opposition leader believes in zero population growth of Bangladesh by 2030. However, newspaper clippings have opined differently. They cited examples from the population data in Scandinavian countries and Japan and argue that these countries have lost their working population due to their negative population growth. They exclaimed that the target of achieving zero population growth by 2030 will result in negative population growth which will drastically reduce working population in Bangladesh. Their prescription is to concentrate on stable population size rather than zero population growth.

Relation between Fertility and Migration

Focusing to the internal migration, two articles (*Forum*, July 2011 and 2012) also present the fertility and migration nexus of Bangladesh. The articles show that there is internal migration increase due to high fertility and population growth in rural areas. According to these articles, the rapid urbanization is a result of this nexus as people migrate to the cities like Dhaka, Chittagong and Rajshahi, Khulna, Braishal, and Sylhet. Therefore, the proportion of urban population raised from 5.2 percent in 1961 to 7.6 percent in 1970, 25.1 percent in 2008, and 27.1 percent in 2010, and it is projected to achieve 39.3 percent in 2030 and 57 percent in 2050.

This internal migration rate is said to be much higher than that of national population growth rate. Among the cities, the migration rate in the capital city Dhaka is the highest. While the national population growth rate is 1.34 percent per year, the national internal migration rate is 4.5 percent, and in the case of Dhaka city this rate is about 6.0 percent (*Forum*, July 2012). On the other hand, the articles stress that among the internal migrants, the poor and homeless people mainly migrate to the cities where they accommodate themselves in the slums or shanties. While the urban growth rate is 3.5 percent per year, in the case of slums, this rate is 7.0 percent (*Forum*, July 2012). Therefore, as population is increasing every year, people are moving to the major cities. They are mostly village poor people who move into the slum

areas. Finally, this in-migration contributes to the rapid growth of urban slums.

Factors of Worries and Satisfaction

Whilst the review of articles has on the one hand revealed some factors as a matter of concern, it has on the other hand presented other factors of satisfaction.

Factors Creating Worries: Articles mainly show fears towards the population boom identifying several reasons for such a trend, stressing that the future population trend is a threat for the nation. Firstly, it has been shown that the future highest population growth would threaten the country for many reasons. On the one hand, poverty alleviation will be hampered, on the other hand, the food supplies, employment, housing, health care, forests and other natural resources, and the environment would be impeded (*The Daily Star*, 21 December 2010). Addressing the population growth as a threat, the article is illustrative:

'Between now and 2025, the country will witness its maximum population growth. Such growth threatens severe implications not only in the alleviation of poverty but also in such matters as food supplies, employment, housing, health care, forests and other natural resources, and the environment' (The Daily Star, 21 December 2010).

Secondly, due to the population boom, Bangladesh has been losing agricultural land continuously. For instance, as 2 million people are added every year to the national population, this leads to a decrease in agricultural land by 1 percent every year. Thus, while in 1980, total agricultural land was 9 million hectares, it is now only 6 million hectares (*The Daily Star*, 16 July 2011). Thirdly, rapid urbanization is seen as another serious problem. According to some estimation, out of the projection of 230 million people by the year 2040, 120 million people will live in urban area. As women in urban slums tend to have more births and use less contraceptives, articles warn that the country population will not be possible to control if the urban population issue is not taken into consideration (*The Daily Star*, July 11, 2011). Finally, the clippings stress some worries about the limitation of government activities, practice of early marriage and tabooed attitudes against birth control among the rural and urban slum women.

Matter of Satisfaction: Only two articles report positive images regarding the present fertility trend and progress of population control. One article highlights the present rate of TFR, and claims that Bangladesh TFR is

close to replacement level fertility which is an even better situation than in 10 larger Indian States:

'Bangladesh's Total Fertility Rate, children born per woman, is 2.2 (nearly the "replacement rate") and lower than that of 10 large Indian states, including Gujarat (2.5) and Haryana (2.3)' (The Daily Star, 8 September 2012).

The other clipping refers to fertility and progress in population control. Compared to Pakistan, Bangladesh's achievement in population control, fertility decline and use of contraceptive is much better:

'Bangladesh has achieved important progress in population control in the last 40 years. This also clearly evident from the comparison of population related index between Bangladesh and Pakistan. In the some index, the picture of Bangladesh is better than Pakistan. Rate of Total population, total fatality rate, use of contraceptive-in every sectors Bangladesh achieved more progress than that of Pakistan. Thus, Bangladesh population is 153 million, whereas it is 181.4 for Pakistan. Researchers argue that if Bangladesh stayed like Pakistan Bangladeshi population has risen to 190 million' (The Daily Prothom Alo, 24 November, 2012)¹.

This clipping lauds the government of Bangladesh for this achievement. Since the mid-1970s, the family planning program has played a vital role in controlling Bangladesh population. Taking statistics as evidence, the article explains that in South Asia Bangladesh has remarkable success in contraceptive use. In Bangladesh, the article explains that 8 percent of married women used contraceptives in 1975, which reached to 61 percent in 2011. But at the same time period, the rate increased from 10% to 56% for India. In the case of Pakistan, though the data is unreported for the whole duration, the rate increased to 30 percent in 2011. The article also reported that Bangladesh's achievement in reducing fertility (measured in terms of TFR which is 2.3 in Bangladesh) is remarkable in comparison with Pakistan (3.2) and India (2.5).

Conclusion

The exploration of the newspaper articles revealed that the print media in Bangladesh is showing their concern on the current fertility trend. It has been observed from the newspaper clippings that both population growth rate and fertility rate are gradually declining in Bangladesh. However, the level of population is increasing for various reasons in

¹ Quotation is the authors translation

Bangladesh. One of the reasons is that the fertility age population are large in numbers than other demographic aged population and those fertility aged people are contributing greatly in the TFR. The newspapers report that though fertility is declining at the national level, significant variation exists at the regional level and among the socio economic groups. The fertility rate is reported to be very high in the urban slums and rural areas. In some cases, early marriage is still rife in Bangladesh which is mostly being practiced among the women of slums and rural areas, and those women consider birth control a taboo. The newspaper clippings also pointed out that the government birth control program is not influencing poor women to reduce fertility much in urban slums and poor rural areas, as they are either beyond the target areas or neglected. Also, there is a lack of motivational and awareness building program in the stated areas. This requires more workable programs from the government level as per newspaper's claiming. Therefore, some of the clippings have shown their critical attitudes towards Bangladesh government and political leaders and assert the crucial role of the policy makers to mitigate the severity of the present scenario.

Some articles presented the relationship between fertility and internal migration trend. To my knowledge, none of the article has focused on emigration or immigration in relation to fertility. The articles identified that the rapid urbanization is a cause of rural -urban migration that happened due to high fertility and population growth in rural areas. The discussion has also shown that the internal migration rate is higher than that of national population growth. The capital of Bangladesh, Dhaka, has had the highest migration rate in Bangladesh than other metropolitan areas. This happens due to rural urban migration and locale in the urban slums, where fertility is very high.

The newspapers clipping also present some worries and satisfaction on the current trend of fertility. Almost all of the articles have expressed their worries about the population bomb of Bangladesh. It has been shown that as population is increasing every year, the population in future will be very alarming for the country's survival. Especially, the articles have painted the image that Bangladesh will be in serious crisis in future with regard to food supplies, employment, housing, health care, forests and other natural resources, and the environment. Besides, Bangladesh is losing its agricultural land every year because of massive urbanization. Hence, in the foreseeable future, a great number of Bangladeshi populations will be living in the city and assumed to face severe problems. Nevertheless, some clippings have also presented some news as a matter of great satisfaction. Great satisfaction is shown with the current declining trends of fertility. Drawing on examples from

South Asia, those articles explain that Bangladesh has a remarkable achievement in fertility reduction compared to India and Pakistan.

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