

Family Planning: An Appraisal of Islamic Methods and Techniques

- Sajad Ahmad Padday

Abstract

Family Planning is no longer a secluded factor of an individual but tangled with the economic and social comfort not only of nation but of mankind itself. To control overgrowth of population modern centre's of research have been set in various parts of the world; like in West the Ford and Rockefeller, University centre's like the Carolina Centre and World organizations like the U.N. Fund for Population Activities. Population explosion is a recent problem, so there is not any direct instruction in the Qur'ān and Hadith about in favour or against the family planning; however the Islamic Jurists either support or condemn the practice of family planning. There are certain techniques and methods in the times of Prophet for birth control like practice of coitus interruptus ('Azl). The present study is to highlight that Islam is not against the family planning rather it provides some useful techniques and methods of contraception.

Key Words: Azl, Contraception, Family Planning, Population explosion

“We expect Women to work like they don't have children and raise children as if they don't work”

Family Planning

Family planning is a joint effort of a couple to space births in order to attain an optimal interval between them, to limit or control the birth rate to attain the desired size of family and to treat the needs of infertile couples who want to have children.¹ It includes the use of contraceptives with the mutual agreement by a couple to regulate their fertility with a view to ward off health, social and economic hardships and to enable them to take responsibilities of their children and society on their shoulders. In other words, it is the method of family planning which encompasses; “spacing of children to allow breast-feeding and safeguard the health of the mother and child, timing of pregnancies to occur at a safe age and adjusting the number of children, not only to the family's need, but also to its physical, financial, educational and child raising capabilities.”²

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Population explosion is not an individual's problem alone, it is a national problem. It results in food scarcity, poverty, unemployment, illiteracy and dearness. Limiting the size of family is a voluntary action by the mutual cooperation between the couple and also be implemented by the existing Government by framing policies in support of family planning. They can use various means to promote and aware the common masses about the benefits of family planning, like; spreading knowledge through mass-media, education and social legislation. They can frame the policies and officially implement them through law and order.³The concept of stabilizing the population with the national economy was the concern of all the times, in the past times the high birth rate was balanced with equally high death rate. It is done for the interests of family as well as for the interest of national economy.⁴ The means and methods were used to control the birth rate but was a matter of individual interest only. The contraceptives were generally used for preventing the pregnancy of illegal sexual relations. However, these preventive techniques were also used for legal purposes under few circumstances, like ill health of wife. In contemporary times this issue has taken a new turn and attained a collective stride.⁵ India like other countries started family planning as a Government programme from the first Five Year Plan in 1952. This programme mainly concentrated on educating the masses about the importance and necessary of family planning.⁶

Islamic Perspective of Family Planning

Family is the basic and nucleus constituent of cosmopolitan world. In Islam the basis for family formation is Marriage. Marriage is a social institution, essentially a civil contract. The essentials of marriage in Islam are based on mutual consent and public declaration.⁷ It is the legal union between a man and a woman bonding together through wedlock. Besides other essences of marriage the legalize sexual intercourse for procreation is very important. The issue of population explosion which affects the global world would be solved where it originates i.e. at family level. The essence of family planning or birth control is to reduce the responsibility of an individual so that the birth of children may not constitute nuisance to the society. Family planning or birth control does not refer to limit the children to two or three but to give birth to a convenient number by an individual family.⁸The objectives of the family in Islam is not merely the procreation of human species but the socio-cultural structure and self-sustaining mechanism which ensures social, ideological and cultural stability is based on

family phenomenon. Preservation and continuation of the human race is one of its objectives.⁹

The primary sources of Islam, the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah* of the Prophet Muhammad are divinely revealed which Muslims hold. The case not explicitly addressed in these two fundamental sources, however, the two complementary but subordinate sources *Ijma* (Consensus of theologians) and *Qiyas* (Analogy) are very much important sources regarding this issue. Muslims also follow the directions of religious leaders and *Ijtihad*, which allows the formulation of independent judgment and interpretation. However, the various schools of law or jurisprudence differ in the extent to which *Ijtihad* is allowed.¹⁰ *Ijtihad* is the ability to analyze the Qur'ānic text or a problematic situation within the relevant culture and historical context and then devise an appropriate interpretation or solution based on a thorough understanding of the Qur'ānic principles and the *Sunnah*. It is very essential as Islam was revealed for all people and for all times, similarly, its jurisprudence must be capable of responding to widely diverse needs and problems, shows the flexibility of Islamic law. The Qur'ānic text does not forbid prevention of conception. However, the Qur'ānic verse which forbids the infanticide, is misunderstood by some Muslim scholars to reject birth control, “*And do not kill your children out of poverty; We shall provide for them and for you. Truly, the killing of them is a great sin.*”¹¹

Family planning is a recent phenomenon due to the population explosion, but traced its roots in ancient societies in one way or the other. When Islam came in the 7th century, there was no such kind of population explosion as we found in modern societies. Poverty was there, but not because of over population. This would be the reason that the Qur'ān did not directly mention any principle regarding the family planning. However, the Qur'ān is and remains the guiding book for the whole humanity, which different jurists quoted either on the support or opposes the family planning.¹² The verse mentioned above, regarding the killing of children, used by different jurists to condemn family planning should be seen in which context the verse addressed. The Arabs kill their children for three reasons; economic stringency, propitiating the gods and the self-imposed shame of searching for a son-in-law.¹³ This verse addressed the people to stop physical killings of children and have nothing to do with family planning or use of contraceptions. The jurists who opposed the family planning have taken the stand that it is the secret infanticide and equivalent to physical

killings. The *hadith* contradicts with their stand, as once a man came to the Prophet of Islam and said, “I have a young wife, I hate that she should be pregnant and I want what men want; but the Jews claim that coitus interruptus (*al-‘azl*) is minor infanticide.” The Prophet replied, “The Jews lie.”¹⁴ Another saying narrated by Ubaid bin Rifa‘a learnt from his father, that, once Hazrat Ali, Zubair, Sa’d and ‘Umar were sitting with several other Companions of the Prophet, talked about ‘*azl*, someone in the discussion remarked that, “Some people think it is a minor form of infanticide,” to which Hazrat Ali replied, “There can be no infanticide till the seven stages of growth are passed; the original clay, then sperm, the clotted blood, the foetus, bones, flesh and then a new being.” Hazrat Umar sitting there said, “How right you are, may God give you long life.”¹⁵

There are two factions of Muslim scholars ;one called family planning lawful and the other called it unlawful to the extent that they said, “Had such a motion been moved at the time of Hazrat Muhammad , he would have deterred it with curse, and had called for jihad against it, as he had done against polytheism, paganism, and idolatry.”¹⁶The faction which termed it as lawful presented several sayings of Prophet (*Ahadith*) like permission of ‘*azl* in certain circumstances or compulsions. The *hadith* related to this issue is in Sahih Bukhari, Hazrat Abu Saeed Khazri narrates: “Once sitting in the company of the Messenger , a person (Majd bin Umar-o-Zamn) said, “O Rasool Allah! We copulate with the imprisoned women in the battle. Since we want to sell them, so what is your opinion regarding ‘*azl*?” The Messenger said, “Do you do so? You have no compulsion, if you do not do so. It is because the being whom Allah has destined to take birth (in the world) would definitely be born.””¹⁷This clearly shows that neither the Qur’ān nor the *Hadith* condemns family planning and the infanticide is not equal as coitus interrupts.

Imam Al-Ghazzali was of the view that ‘*azl* is permitted, but depends on the motives behind this practice. He put forward three causes in which the practice of ‘*azl* is permitted- to safeguard one’s proprietary right as was in the case of a slave girl, to preserve the beauty of wife or to protect her life if having risk in birth of a child, and the fear of numerous anxieties by having numerous children.¹⁸ The practice of ‘*azl* is also permitted during the breast-feeding of an infant, as if a women becomes pregnant during breast-feeding, the infant born will be weak and the duration of breast-feeding mentioned in the Qur’ān is about two years.¹⁹ The *hadith* related to this issue is narrated by Hazrat Asma bint Yazid Al-Sakan, she state

that she heard from the Prophet saying that, “Do not kill your children in secret for *al-ghil* (intercourse with a woman while she is breast-feeding her infant) is like a horse-rider in a fight who shall be thrown of the horse and trampled.”²⁰ The scholars of Islamic law in earlier times mentioned only the method of *al-‘azl* to stop pregnancy as it was known to them at that time and through analogous reasoning (*qiyas*) alternative methods of contraception can be permitted with some limitations. The modern methods used to barrier between man and woman or medicines prescribed by physicians are allowed as long as they did not destroy fecundity permanently. The Hanafi jurists permitted the blocking of the mouth of the uterus, but with the husband’s consent and Shafeei jurists allowed temporary delay of pregnancy.²¹ Moreover, Islam endorses child-parent relationship in a very naturalistic manner by specifying the rights and obligations of one to the other. In order fulfill these rights and obligations one should properly plan his family life. The modern methods permissible by different schools of thought to delay pregnancy are described below.

Methods and Techniques

It is very important for marriage and family formation that an appropriate and sizeable planning is indispensable. The methods and techniques used to avoid pregnancy and planning a family is permissible according to different jurists of Islam, who are in support of family planning, are as follows:

1. *Al-‘azl*

This method was known and used by many Companions of Prophet of Islam. ‘*Azl* means the withdrawnlof man’s genital organ from the vagina of the woman before ejaculation.²² Al-Ghazali, scholar of Shafeei school of thought, permitted the prevention of conception and rejecting the practice of abortion. The jurists of the Hanafi school of thought, permits coitus interruptus, but with the wife’s consent. However, it can be bypassed in bad times and to avoid bad offspring. The Maliki, Hambali and Zaydi schools of thought permits this practice but with the wife’s consent. The Imami Shieites prefer that the wife’s permit is obtained at the time of the marriage contract. Imam Shawkani was of the view that the practice of ‘*azl* is permissible on behalf of certain reasons like to protect a suckling child from the dangers of certain changes in the pregnant mother because of pregnancy, to avoid getting too many children or avoiding getting them at all.²³

2. Barriers Methods

These methods are used to prevent pregnancy by confinement the male gamete (sperm) from triumph the female egg, like use of condoms (both for men and women), the diaphragm (for women), spermicide (contraceptive foam, tablets, jelly or cream).²⁴The pills used for birth control prevent conception by inhibiting ovulation. The pills are orally taken for about 20 or more days during each menstrual cycle, some of the pills work after the intercourse. These pills are permissible as they prevent implantation; however, the physician consultation must be taken for possible side-effects.²⁵

3. Abortion

The other method used to prevent the pregnancy is abortion. This practice is done for different reasons, all of which are not acceptable to religion. Theologians who find abortion permissible under certain conditions preferred use of contraceptives. Although several Muslim jurists permit abortion, but they differ on the stages of foetal development beyond which it becomes prohibited. They divided abortion in three tiers; before 40 days, 120 days and after 120 days. The tradition of Prophet informs about this development of foetus, as the foetus is held as *nutfa* for 40 days, *alaqa* for another 40 days and *mudgha* for additional 40days, then the ensoulment takes place over 120 days. All theologians are of the consensus that after 120 days abortion is categorically prohibited except to save the mother's life.

4. Sterilization

This method involves the surgical operation; in men this is called vasectomy, which blocks the tube which passes sperm from the testes to the prostate and to other reproductive organs through the male reproductive tract and in women this is called tubal ligation, which blocks the fallopian tubes which transport the ovum. This method is permissible but is prohibited in certain circumstances when it poses serious harm to a woman's health, when it involves any prohibited act like touching or looking at the private parts of a woman that are forbidden for him to look.²⁶The theologians of Islam have no objection as if performed for treatment and temporary loss of the ability of a man to impregnate a woman or woman to conceive. But, if it is performed for permanent contraceptive purposes then it becomes problematic.

Conclusion

Family planning is a very important issue for health and development of a society, basically a human right. Muslims living in different societies aspire with the developments taken place in the world. The issue of Family planning and use of contraception in Islam has become a grave concern as due to the unprecedented population growth in the Muslim countries. Contraception has acquired new dimensions that pose serious challenges to the juristic process. The methods and techniques permitted by different jurists of Islam should be used to support the increased use of contraception, which will help to prevent the unplanned pregnancies and to achieve the desired family size in order to provide them satisfactory rearing and caring. The people should actively engage in promoting the birth spacing and planning for the improvement of maternal and child health outcomes.

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¹⁸ M.E. Khan, *Op.Cit.*, p.187

¹⁹ Al-Baqra: 233

²⁰ M.E. Khan, *Op.Cit.*, p.189

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