

NATIONAL POPULATION POLICY AND GENDER EQUITY

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The preliminary draft of a national population policy submitted to the Minister of Health and Family Welfare by a group of experts headed by me, has provoked the kind of debate that the members of the Expert Group wanted very much. For this, we are indebted to a few women's organisations that drew attention to the potential harm that a few of the suggestions in the report could cause to women.

The draft National Population Policy document runs to 41 typed pages and is divided into three parts.

The first part is titled "Policy Framework". A precondition of progressive demographic transition in a developing society is the recognition that population policy is not a matter of birth control alone, but of promoting human development and of all-round progressive social change. Enlightened population policy does not depend on its success solely on fertility-related interventions, but involves a socially-sensitive combination of, among other instruments, health and nutrition interventions, educational interventions and socio-political interventions such as land reform and panchayati raj. It requires a special recognition of the need to defend the rights of women and to

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combat gender oppression, and of women and women's organisations as instruments of change.

The Draft emphasises that gender equity is fundamental to population policy and to achieving a better life for all. It stresses the importance of an enabling environment and of empowerment mechanisms for achieving our population goals, rather than targets for specific contraceptive methods. It calls for shifting the scene of planning and action to the Panchayat and Nagarpalika levels. It calls for empowering, in different ways, nearly one million women members of elected local-level democratic institutions.

In the second section of the Draft, on new structures for implementation, the establishment of a Population and Social Development Commission, chaired by an eminent social worker, has been recommended. In the Commission, a whole-time member is to be in charge of gender and ethical issues to address precisely the kinds of issues that concern some highly motivated and dedicated women's organisations today. The Commission is to be structured on the so-called "Homi Bhabha principle", that is, it should be vested with the necessary governmental authority to operate a population and Social Development Fund and at the same time be free from rigid rules and bureaucratic procedures.

The major criticisms of women's organisations relate to four points in the next section of the draft, titled "Other Measures". I present my personal views on these issues (the Expert Group,

which was dissolved on the day the Draft was submitted, does not exist anymore).

In democratic societies, signals that help to achieve agreed social goals are often incorporated in public policies and government procedures. In the Draft, it was suggested that "employees of the Central Government, State Governments, Municipalities as well as employees of various public sector undertakings must give the lead in adopting the small family norm. The service rules in the Central and State governments would be suitably modified to ensure that the small family norm is adopted by their employees. Similarly, all new entrants to the government who are married before the age of 21 years in the case of boys and 18 years in the case of girls will be debarred from recruitment". This recommendation refers only to employment by the state.

The fear has been expressed that such personnel policies may affect poor women and children adversely. I think that the following question is still relevant: what then are the most appropriate social signals to indicate the need to achieve a total fertility rate of 2.1 per annum by the year 2010, failure to achieve which would be a social and ecological disaster. If, however, after careful analysis it is felt that the incorporation of the provision relating to the age at marriage in recruitment rules would do harm to women, then it should be dropped.

Paragraph 9.2 of this part of the Draft is poorly worded and can, I must admit, evoke fears of coercion. The background to the proposal is the following : India has had some success with Ecological Battalions, made up mainly of ex-servicemen who help with afforestation and other ecology related tasks in remote areas. In this context, it was felt that ex-servicemen, known for their discipline and devotion to national causes, could help, "wherever feasible", to take health care systems to the un-reached. All over the world, there has been discussion on the role of the armed forces in the context of a "peace dividend", and in several countries, ecological and health security have been identified as areas where the redirection of personnel from defence to development can be valuable. As pointed out, however, the words of the present draft, and particularly the first sentence ("the army and para-military forces have a better opportunity of promoting the small family norm") are ill-chosen, and can create legitimate fears of coercion; hence the purpose behind this suggestion needs to be explained in unambiguous terms.

Paragraph 13. 1. under "Other Measures" refers to the Rajasthan and Haryana legislations that recommend that persons who do not adopt the two-child-family norm be debarred prospectively from contesting elections for panchayats, zilla parishads and nagarpalikas, and says that these legislations reflect "political commitment". I wish to make it clear that I personally reject the legitimacy of any legislation that prevents

a person from standing for elections at any level on the basis of the number of children that she or he has. I do feel, however that, persons in public life "Should adopt voluntarily the small family norm" and that "elected people's representatives...become role models for the public to emulate". I strongly feel, as the Draft says, that "further legislation in this area... should safeguard the interests of women, particularly those belonging to the socially and economically underprivileged sections of society.

The Draft states that the "identification of family planning with contraception/sterilisation has limited the perspective of the family welfare programme and has created a negative image in the minds of the people.... it is essential to erase its present negative image and substitute it with the positive image of the programme. Such a programme will emphasise measures like higher age at marriage, literacy, education, reduction of infant mortality, increasing birth spacing, management of infertility and the desirability of having a planned family". At various points, the Expert Group was urged to explicitly condemn certain contraceptives -- particularly some injectable contraceptives -- in the draft document. We decided not to do so. The draft does not advocate or condemn any specific contraceptive method; such an analysis, we felt, is more appropriate to a technical paper than a policy paper. At the same time, however the Draft makes it quite clear that we reject any contraceptive method that is

scientifically unacceptable, or is introduced without providing adequate information or support services to users. The Draft says : "India has an efficient scientific set-up for testing for safety, reliability and acceptability of contraceptive methods before introducing them into the family welfare programme. Although controversies are raised from time to time about various methods, there is no reason why a range of methods, provided they are scientifically tested and approved, meet ethical standards and are backed up by appropriate services, should not be made available to men and women. In delivering these services, it must be ensured that all potential users can exercise a free choice, backed by full information and counselling about the safety, efficacy and possible side-effects of each method, and how they should be used".

The central objective of the draft document on national population policy prepared by the Expert Group on Population Policy is to stress human development issues in population policy and to do so from a pro-poor, pro-woman perspective. It is a draft document, intended for wide circulation and wide public debate. In the light of the apprehensions voiced by some concerned women's organisations, I have no hesitation in stating my personal opinion that paragraphs 9.1., 9.2 and 13.1 of the last section of the Draft (which relate to employment by the state, the role of the armed forces and the Rajasthan and Haryana legislations) will benefit from re-drafting to allay genuine concerns.