



Applied Ethics
(other than Bioethics)

Morality of Population Control of Bangladesh

Fahmina Ahmed
Jahangirnagar University

ABSTRACT: The rapid rate of population growth in the last half of the present century causes anxiety about the future of humanity because the amount of resources needed to satisfy basic necessities is extremely large. Correspondingly, the satisfaction of basic needs cannot be the sole criterion of the good life. Human beings have a right to live a life composed of things that make life go best. The case of Bangladesh shows that the majority of people live a life barely worth living, a life morally undesirable. One major reason is the rapid increase in population. Bangladesh covers an area slightly less than that of the state of Illinois, but has a population that is roughly half of the total population of the United States. The quality of life is inexorably linked to population growth. Further, human welfare and the quality of life are closely linked to the availability of resources. Rapid increases in population growth reduces resource availability and often degrades the environment. At some point, regulation is needed to limit population growth in Bangladesh in order to maximize opportunities for living worthwhile lives both by present as well as future generations. I develop a moral viewpoint that justifies population control in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is one of the least developed countries of the world. Rapid increase of population causes government to declare it as the number one problem and major impediment to economic development and progress. With an area of 1,47,570 sq km — a size little less than that of the state of Illinois, USA the country's population has almost tripled to the present 125 million from the 1951 figure. In education, health and housing sectors, the expenditure of the government was about one-third of its total expenditure (1995-96 FY). (1) This huge amount had to be spent merely to provide the country's large population with some basic requirements of life. The per capita GNP is US\$ 283 and electricity consumption rate is 90 kwh, infant mortality rate is 81.8 per thousand, life expectation at birth is 56 years, literacy rate is 37% there is only one telephone per 380 people — these data indicate that Bangladesh is far behind the developed countries in respect of the physical quality of life. One of the main reasons of this bleak picture of Bangladesh is its inability to keep the number of people within tolerable limits. In this condition it is not desirable that people will knowingly produce children who would most likely live a life not worthy of living — a life so miserable that it would be better not having been born at all.

Narveson thinks that unhappiness that a prospective person will experience constitutes a moral reason not to bring her or him (2) into existence while happiness which she or he is

likely to experience if born provides no moral reason to produce her or him. Morality seeks to promote good and avoid harm or prevent suffering. Not harming people takes moral preference than benefitting them. A moral justification, therefore, exists to avoid conception so that a probable child would not be in abject poverty or suffer any form of adversities. The condition of Bangladesh indicates that the individual or people who will come into existence in future will very likely experience abject poverty or adversities as the socio-economic and environmental condition of this country is very poor. So, there is moral justification to limit the birth of new people in Bangladesh.

The quality of life which is morally desirable does not consist in the mere satisfaction of the basic necessities of life. It consists in having the best things. According to Parfit, the best categories of creative activity and aesthetic experience, the best relationship between different individuals as well as other things which contribute most to make life worth living constitute the best things wherein lies the higher quality of life. (3) While life is of lower quality where there exists "worse housing, overcrowded school, more pollution, less unspoilt countryside, fewer opportunities and smaller share per person of various other kinds of resources". (4) Man's unique ability of adjusting herself/himself with the severe adversities does not imply that serious deprivation is the end of human life. As a human being people have a right to live a life composed of best things. At the same time they should have the freedom and ability to choose whether or not to have that life.

Procreative right is a basic human right which is universally recognized. It is declared in the UN charter that "All couples and individuals have the basic right to decide *freely and responsibly* the number and spacing of their children and to have the information, education and means to do so; the responsibility of couples and individuals in the exercise of this right takes into account the needs of their living and future children and their responsibilities toward the community". (5) It is declared that this right should be exercised 'responsibly' implying that in order to achieve common good couples or individuals should consider the overall circumstances of the society. The high density of population with little job opportunities in villages push people towards cities causing there even higher density and scarcity of accommodation which in turn leads to the growth of slums in city areas. The slums are barely livable and are often the source of unsocial activities. These create health hazards and pollute the environment.

The population projection of Bangladesh indicates that if the present rate (1.88%) of population growth (6) continues then the population will increase to 131.4, 158.3, 229.7 and 846.1 millions in the years 2000, 2010, 2030 and 2100 respectively with the corresponding population density of 912, 1099, 1595 and 5875 per sq. km. Such increase in population will create tremendous pressure on the existing limited natural resources accompanying with it various social and environmental problems and consequently degrading the quality of life in near and further future. A lower population growth rate of say 1 per cent will make the task of planners and executors easier for improving the quality of life through better resource management and technology adoption. But technology does not create basic resources, it only diversifies products and makes the means of production more efficient. The conception of technology as the saviour is now treated with reservations because the application of technological inventions and innovations are not all blessings. Acid rain, green house effect, ozone layer depletion and long lived radio-active wastes are acute instances of diverse effects of technology. But the need for technological inventions will increase with the increase of human numbers. More people, therefore, means additional application of new and innovated technology with the possibility of affecting the environment adversely. The forest cover of Bangladesh has been reduced to about 6 per cent of the total area from 22 per cent over the last forty-five years. (7) The rapid rate of population growth is mainly responsible for deforestation since it necessitates the clearance of forest to meet the requirement of food and habitation of the growing population. The

main victim of such deforestation is the biodiversity as species are lost for ever. Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council reported that at least 500 different medical plants are on the verge of extinction. The loss of such huge diversity of plant genetic resources by destroying natural forests is a grave ecological loss for the world as a whole besides Bangladesh. Hence, the greater is the human number, the greater will be the adverse effect on environment and consequent degradation of the quality of life of both present and future generation. Majority of the people of Bangladesh cannot think of having the best things that make life go better or best. They are mainly concerned with the satisfaction of the basic necessities of life. Even that would be difficult since population growth has reduced the land-man ratio to 0.11 ha in 1990 from 0.13 ha in 1981. (8) So the amount of per capita food will decrease while increasing the landless population. A large number of people are, therefore, ill fed or under fed. Insufficient intake of calories and the hidden hunger of micronutrient stunt the size of an average Bangladeshi. The per capita consumption of 30 million people is less than 1900 calories at present against the standard requirement of 2300 calories. The health service sector is poor and finds it difficult to keep pace with the ever increasing population. These figures demonstrate that it is hard for most people even to satisfy the bare needs of life. In such a circumstance, if the people of Bangladesh exercise their reproductive right according to their wish without any restriction then it would limit their some other basic rights recognized by the state as well as by the UN. Some of these rights are freedom from hunger, poverty, ignorance, fear and the right to an adequate standard of living which includes adequate food, clothing and housing and continuous improvement of living conditions. (9) In the context of Bangladesh, these rights are more pressing than the right to procreate. Right is a kind of claim and being claim, a right can be outweighed by other more justifiable claims or rights. It, therefore, follows that like all other rights reproductive right can be outweighed by more justifiable rights. The state may restrict the procreative right of the individual since its duty is to promote common good. Instead of having best things in life, people rather live a life barely worth living. The major cause is the number of people which put pressure on limited resources and curtail the development programmes of Bangladesh so that the expenses for satisfying the basic needs of its growing population can be made.

Generally it is held that reproduction is a private matter but examination of the issue reveals that the production of a child is not confined to parents only. It involves society or state. The responsibility of the state or society is to provide proper environment for the balanced development of children. Public service is required even at gestational stage through maternities, hospitals, clinics etc. As the majority of the people of Bangladesh are poor, the large portion of the cost of these services is borne by the state which inhibits the plan for a better life of the people of Bangladesh. So, for the promotion of public welfare, justice and equality control of reproductive right appears morally permissible.

Freedom is of great concern in the domain of morality. When an individual is able to do an action without any restriction, then he is free. But absolute freedom is not possible. Generally by free act we mean that a person can do otherwise. Freedom requires two things: absence of constraint and presence of option. People have the freedom to choose the number of children they want to have. But in the UN declaration of reproductive right emphasis is given on the responsibility of the individuals. People should take into account the common good in choosing freely. Freedom contains no value when individuals are ignorant or burdened with the duty of satisfying the basic necessities. It is not possible to guarantee freedom without guaranteeing its worth. Morality requires that to ensure freedom, economic well-being of the individual must be guaranteed. No question of freedom of choice arises in a situation where people have no alternative but to satisfy the basic needs of life. Compulsory population limitation programme is morally objectionable. But policies which indirectly restrict freedom to procreate in order to improve the quality of life of people are justifiable on the ground that freedom is of little value if individuals

are unable to take its advantage. We are not arguing for the total rejection of freedom of poor people regarding procreation. We are arguing only for the limitation of the number of children couples may have. The question may arise whether incentive programmes affect the autonomy of people regarding reproductive decisions. There exists such a probability since the purpose of the programme is to influence the reproductive decision of people for having fewer children. It is found that the economic condition of many least developed countries like Bangladesh is such that a poor woman has to produce a proof of sterilization in order to have emergency food. (10) The satisfaction of people's most fundamental need is possible by sacrificing their right to procreate. This shows that freedom is of no worth if people are unable to exercise it. The usual practice of giving primacy to freedom is to be set aside until particular material level of well-being is attained where freedom can be exercised meaningfully. It can be argued that in a sense, freedom is enhanced by population control measures by increasing the opportunities for choice. The couples are offered greater freedom since these measures enable them to decide when or whether to have a child or not. The ability to avoid unwanted pregnancies and spacing of births have given freedom of choice to millions of women throughout the world including Bangladesh.

Derek Parfit's formulation of the argument known as the identity problem (11) causes difficulty for the arguments to control population growth. According to it, the timing of conception determines a person's identity. A woman cannot postpone conception because a different child would be born if she conceives at a later time than at an earlier time. The postponement is needed as the woman's temporary illness will cause her conception of any child at present to be deformed. Ordinarily the decision would be the postponement of conception with the common belief that the same child will be born irrespective of the timing of conception. But the identity problem makes it clear that the same child would not be born wherein the problem lies. The adoption of laissez faire policy would not make people worse off but the adoption of the population control policy to provide better living conditions, less crowded state of the world would lead to their non-existence. This is a sort of paradox as the policies which diminish the quality of life of people living in future cannot be criticized since that will be against these people's interest. Their existence is not worse than never having existed. Kavka (12) attempts to counter this with the help of a slave-child example. A couple agreed to produce a child to be a slave on being paid \$ 50,000 which they needed to buy a yacht. They can justify their action on the ground that living a slave life is better than not being existed. But the wrongness of couple's act remains strong because when there is option for the couple to have a free child or no child they have no right to produce a slave child in any context. This is an undesirable state of the world in terms of the criterion called restricted life. A restricted life, according to Kavka is the one where there is absence of one or more of the major characteristics which generally make life valuable or worth living. The absence of liberty makes the life of the slave child restricted. Kant's second form of categorical imperative modified by Kavka states that rational beings or their creation, that is, their being brought into existence cannot be treated as means but as ends in themselves. The couple's action with respect to the slave child amounts to treating of the child only as a means to their ends and, therefore, condemned by the modified version of categorical imperative. For various reasons, people have to live restricted lives. According to Kavka, if the conditions of a society or world (other things being equal) are such that people have to live restricted lives, then such conditions are undesirable from moral perspective.

In the absence of a social security system and adequate income opportunity along with the desire for survival, a large number of children are brought into existence by the people of Bangladesh as the means of security of their lives. The general practice is that sons would look after the parents during their old age. Besides majority of the parents of Bangladesh do not care about the proper upbringing of their children, they do not spend much in this regard. They are treating the children as means to their ends which is morally wrong. There

is need to maintain a balance between the number of people and the available resources of the country so that prospective individuals would not have to be used as means. The argument of the restricted life and modified version of Kant's second form of categorical imperative show that there is need of controlling the rapid rate of population increase of Bangladesh so that people do not have to live restricted life or be used as means which is morally undesirable.

The implications of utilitarianism is concerned with the growth of population. Of the two forms of utilitarianism — total and average utility, the total principle of utility gives too much importance to population increase and ultimately leads to such enormous population who are all worse off and the situation, Parfit thinks is considered repugnant by most people. Mere addition of people whose quality of life is below the level of life of existing population also involves repugnant conclusion. It is argued that such conclusion should be rejected on the basis of the nature of life that people should live. (13) Morality requires that every human being should equally enjoy the satisfaction of basic human needs and amenities with the freedom and opportunities and provisions for having the best things in life if she or he wants. We cannot well-come a situation where there exists various sorts of scarcities and adversities arising due to the acceptance of the total principle or mere addition of people and thereby deteriorating quality of life. It is not morally desirable to bring into existence a huge number of people at the minimum level of resources and opportunities.

Maternal mortality rate and the infant mortality rate are higher in Bangladesh compared to other countries of the world. The condition of the society should be such that more people do not suffer or die young since a situation is morally worse where more people suffer or die young. (14) In Bangladesh huge number of people come into existence and suffer from different types of adversities or dying young. Though excessive population growth is not the only reason, yet it is one of the principal reasons for such a situation. The size of the population is enormously big for the limited resources of the country. It is not morally desirable to sustain a huge number of people at a low quality of living. In the context of remote future, it may not be possible to sustain even a very low growth rate of 0.1 per cent since it will mathematically lead to an unacceptable population density of 18 persons per sq. meter in 10,000 years' time. The growth rate should be compatible with resource and time in order to achieve the quality of life for the total population of Bangladesh desired from the moral point of view. We have limited resources, lack technologically competent persons and unable to conserve environment properly. It is not possible to have actual freedom in such a situation rather it makes life restricted. Both freedom and human well-being are important but in real life situations we cannot always have both. It, therefore, follows from the above discussion that the control of rapid rate of population growth of Bangladesh is morally justified.

Notes

(1) From the 1995-96 budget published in *The Bangladesh Observer* and other dailies on 16.6.95.

(2) Cf. Narveson, J, "Moral Problems of Population", in *The Monist* vol 57, 1973, pp-62-86.

(3) Cf. Parfit, D, "Overpopulation and the Quality of Life", in *Applied Ethics*, ed. Singer, p, OUP, 1986, p. 161; hereafter cited as Parfit, "Overpopulation". Italics are mine.

(4) Parfit, "Overpopulation", p-146.

- (5) United Nations, *Report of the United Nations World Population Conference*, A/Conf. 60/19, New York, UN, 14f. Italics are mine.
- (6) Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). *Bangladesh health and Demographic Survey: Findings in Brief 1994 and 1995*, Statistics Division under the Ministry of Planning, Dhaka April 1995, p-1; hereafter cited as BBS, *Health and Demography*.
- (7) vide Sobhan, M.A., "Major Environmental Concerns in Bangladesh", published in *The Bangladesh Observer*, on 28.2.94.
- (8) Cf. Mahtab, F.U. and Karim, Z, "Population and Agricultural Land Use: Towards a Sustainable Food Production System in Bangladesh" in *Ambio* Vol 21, No. 1, Feb 1990, p-50.
- (9) These rights are stated in the unofficial document of the United Nations Preparatory Committee for the International Conference on Population and Development, pp:11-12.
- (10) Cf. Hartmann, B, *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs: The Global Policies of Population Control and Contraceptive Choice*, Harper and Row; New York, 1987.
- (11) Parfit, D, "On Doing the Best for Our Children", in *Ethics and Population* ed. Bayles, M.D., Schenkman Publishing Co. Inc., Cambridge, Mass, 1976; pp:100-115.
- (12) Vide. Kavka, G.S., "The Paradox of Future Individuals", in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol 11, No-2., 1981; pp-93-113.
- (13) Parfit, "Overpopulation", pp-145-164.
- (14) Parfit, "Overpopulation", p:146.