Introduction

At present, Pakistan – with a population of 207 million – is the world’s sixth most populous country. The Pakistani state has framed addressing population growth as an essential element of economic sustainability and prosperity. The country launched its family planning program in the 1960s, making it a pioneer among developing countries. Fifty years later, the program has proved unable to increase contraceptive uptake.

Research on ideological barriers to contraceptive use, however, regularly uncovers questions by citizens about Western support for family planning programs. Many of these fears relate to suspicions that the goal of family planning is to shrink the Muslim population. Despite the persistence and prevalence of these beliefs, the family planning literature has failed to unpack these concerns. The fears, instead, are often dismissed as unfounded conspiracies.

Irrespective of the question of their veracity, however, it is essential to understand the nature of these anxieties voiced by Pakistani citizens. The present study investigates perceptions of the Pakistani Family Planning Program by situating these concerns in their larger geopolitical context characterized by foreign military intervention, local corruption, and an exclusionary political system. By focusing on unpacking these beliefs, we do not seek to overstate their role in contraceptive decision-making. Although we acknowledge that a multitude of factors contribute to the uptake of contraceptives in Pakistan, our study aims to understand a concern that has not been fully investigated within the literature.

Methods

The study is informed by a critical ethnography conducted in the village of Nashpatai Kalay in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The data were collected over a period of 13 months, from September 2013–April 2015. The study included seventy-six participants (forty-one females, and thirty-five males).

Latent content analysis was used; the researcher coded passages considering their intent, and their role in the context of data. Data analysis was managed within Atlas TI. The theoretical underpinnings of this article are informed by Foucault’s work on governmentality and biopower which operate from the perspective that the reproductive body is a discursive site where power manifests.

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Alberta Health Research Ethics Board, and the National Bioethics Committee in Pakistan.

Results

Our key finding was that family planning evolved as the site where mistrust in the Pakistani government and anti-Western sentiment manifested. The anxieties around family planning use were vocalized as fears of Muslim demographic vulnerability. Villagers believed that the potentiality of their population was so dangerous it needed to be controlled, otherwise, their population could disrupt global systems of domination.

Underlying the villager’s resistance to family planning were three notions:

1. Lack of Resonance of the Logic Underlying Family Planning in Pakistan
   Our respondents doubted the connection between a small family and national prosperity. They instead felt Pakistan needed to be protected from any shortages that potentially could occur. Our respondents demonstrated little confidence in government reports of the country’s inability to support so many citizens as they had no experience with the potential resource shortages that concerned the government.

2. Perceptions of Western Interference in Pakistan
   Ideological resistance to Western interference was universal amongst the villagers. The ongoing conflict in Pakistan was a lived reality for the villagers. The insecurity created by the conflict permeated their lives. In their perspective, US intervention was directly correlated with the escalation of violence in the region. Villagers did not trust the US, and this mistrust influenced perspectives on initiatives associated with the West which included family planning. Generally, our respondents accepted that the USA would go to any lengths to achieve its aims, among which was the destruction of Islam.

3. Mistrust in the Pakistani Government
   The sentiment that the government would sell out its citizens for financial remuneration undermined the faith that our respondents had in the government. There was little belief that the government would work to protect the interests of its citizens.

Our respondents were not passive in their subjugation. Instead they took multiple, albeit subtle, forms of resistance. For some this manifested in a preference for traditional methods, for others their approach was more passive and focused on ideological resistance to fertility control.

Conclusion

Family Planning was the discursive site where anti-Western sentiment manifested. For our respondents, resisting family planning and its ideology was a means to resist the violence inflicted by the West and the complicity of the Pakistani government.

Literature Cited