

Family planning in Afghan villages

By Dr Harun Najafizada

Qaseem Ali, a farmer in Charkent District of Balkh Province, is returning home from his farm along with a bunch of his children, tired but hopeful. He is 60 years old, but has never used a condom in his life. Nor has his wife ever used any type of contraception. Consequently she gave birth to eleven children with little space between them, so before she's given enough milk to one baby the next is born. Five sons and six daughters – all from one woman. That's not the whole story: the mother has had at least three miscarriages and sadly has lost a baby boy a few months old.

From the children who remained alive, none has had the chance of any schooling at all. All have been focused on tending the soil, their main source of income. Their first and last struggle has been how to survive. Only now that the older sons are able to help their father and his daughters are married off, Qaseem can provide his youngest son with the chance to go to school.

Life in Afghan villages is simple and friendly, but hard and full of risk. Families are warm and large, in spite of the fact that many families, such as Qaseem's, have lost one or more babies during, before or after birth.

"We had no clinic, no doctor to tell us few children is in fact the basis for a better life. As God had given me the chance, I continued to father children, but later on they started advertising on TV and I saw that using a condom was another option", Qaseem Ali says. He could only watch TV when he visited the city.

Using condoms or, as they call them in Afghanistan, balloons is not common and people are shy about them. They were rarely available freely in the villages. But now, contraception is slowly making its way into the families in remote villages in a new way. The Afghan government is distributing millions of condoms and contraceptive tablets, which are free of charge or sometimes sold cheaply, in order to enable families to provide better for a smaller number of children.

Midwives at the health centres provide family planning for those who can get there, but the bulk of the responsibility lies with Community Health Workers (CHWs). The Afghan government has set up health centres so far as funding allowed, but for those who live too far to get there, CHWs provide the most basic healthcare.

The number of these volunteer workers, who are on the front line of saving mothers' and babies' health, is approaching 30,000, but even this is much less than the country needs. In every village you have to have at least two CHWs, one male and the other female.

Roqia has been a CHW in Charkent District of Balkh for over twelve years now. She works promoting the health of her fellow villagers, a few hundred families living in Baba Qawanchi village. One of her fundamental responsibilities is enabling families to space births by providing condoms and other contraceptives.

“I provide up to 15 to 20 women a month with condoms or contraceptive tablets. It’s useful because it brings space between births. The health and life of women are improved. Giving birth to children is not like looking after sheep. The woman’s health is important. She cannot keep giving birth to babies one after the other and then look at their situation”, she says.

The need for CHWs and midwives is felt across the country. There are many centres where women train to be midwives. Afghanistan has some six thousand midwives and needs another five thousand to reduce the appalling number of maternal and newborn deaths – including by spacing between births.

Dr. Azada Parsa has been working as in-country manager of HealthProm’s project to save mothers’ and children’s lives in Charkent since 2012.

“We must speak to families directly. We need to use clergy and religious people, mostly because their words are accepted by society more often to raise awareness of birth spacing. Having fewer children is useful for the family’s economy and also for the health of the family and, of course, for society. Fewer children bring with them happier life”, she says.

And the viewpoint of Afghan clerics has also softened with regard to population control recently.

Khodadad Basery, is a mullah at a mosque in Charkent District and he reluctantly approves usage of contraceptives. “My advice is that if a man can provide for his family, he is not authorized to control birth. If he cannot look after his family properly, and to reduce poverty and misery, and to provide schooling , etc, it’s good to have fewer children. But the tradition of Islam is that you must not stop having children.”

However, the health of the family does not depend only on CHWS and clinics. Travelling is a nightmare between villages, let alone visiting a health centre. And here is when the CHWs’ significance comes in.

For example, the road from Charkent to Mazar-e-Sharif is poor and two hours long. Few vehicles take this road. The main transport for many is donkeys, even for pregnant women. This is also a factor for the high number of maternal deaths.

While I was travelling back from the villages, I saw a man walking on foot along with a donkey which was carrying his wife, under a white borqa, and a young child to a health centre. It would not have been polite to ask whether their journey was, as it often is, about pregnancy. Like this man, many save their families from walking under a hot sun to the health centre. But the government wants them to look for a better solution: family planning.