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Broaching Birth Control With Afghan Mullahs

By SABRINA TAVERNISE

MAZAR-I-SHARIF, Afghanistan — The mullahs stared silently at the screen. They shifted in their chairs and fiddled with pencils. Koranic verses flashed above them, but the topic was something that made everybody a little uncomfortable.

“A baby should be breast-fed for at least 21 months,” said the instructor. “Milk is safe inside the breast. Dust and germs can’t get inside.”

It was a seminar on birth control, a likely subject for a nation whose fertility rate of 6 children per woman is the highest in Asia. But the audience was unusual: 10 Islamic religious leaders from this city and its suburbs, wearing turbans and sipping tea.

The message was simple. Babies are good, but not too many; wait two years before having another to give your wife’s body a chance to recover. Nothing in Islam expressly forbids birth control. But it does emphasize procreation, and mullahs, like leaders of other faiths, consider children to be blessings from God, and are usually the most determined opponents of having fewer of them.

It is an attitude that Afghanistan can no longer afford, in the view of the employees of the nonprofit group that runs the seminars, Marie Stopes International. The high birthrate places a heavy weight on a society where average per capita earnings are about \$700 a year. It is also a risk to mothers. Afghanistan is second only to Sierra Leone in maternal mortality rates, which run as high as 8 percent in some areas.

“If we work hard on this issue, we can rescue our country from misery,” said Rahmatuddin Bashardost, a doctor who helps lead the mullahs’ classes.

The mullahs were reluctant participants. Truth be told, they were paid to show up. But surprisingly, they seemed to emerge from the session invigorated.

“This was a useful and friendly discussion,” said Mullah Amruddin, a tall man in a dramatic turban. “If you have too many children and you can’t control them, that’s bad for Islam.”

Maybe they were so receptive because a mullah led the class, using their own language — scripture from the Koran. Or maybe it was because some attitudes are starting to change.

Syed Wasem Massoom, 29, a mullah and one of the trainers, said urban Afghans were looking for ways to have fewer children. Afghanistan was changing, he said, especially its cities, and mullahs had better be thinking about these issues.

“People kept asking us how to have less children,” he said.

Afghan women who work for Marie Stopes, distributing birth control door to door in the country’s capital, have also noticed an interest. An overwhelming majority of people are still skeptical of their motives. (Foreign spies! Christian missionaries who want to reduce the Muslim population!) But a growing number are open to the idea.

“Sometimes they are kind of surprised that this kind of thing exists,” said one of the workers, a woman named Aziza.

In 2009 alone, the sale of birth control pills nearly doubled to 11,000 in September from 6,000 packages in January, according to Marie Stopes figures.

One woman was so happy to have birth control pills that she hugged and kissed Aziza, ripped open a package and swallowed a pill with a gulp of water.

“She said she didn’t want to wait until evening,” Aziza said, laughing at the memory. The total number of the woman’s children: 17. Three dead, 14 living.

The most difficult families are ones headed by mullahs. Aziza and her colleagues tread carefully in those households. Mahmouda, another worker, recalled walking into one such house and finding the mullah’s wife washing clothes and trying to calm a baby. She signaled silently that Mahmouda should talk in a low voice.

“ ‘If my husband finds out, he’ll punish me,’ ” Mahmouda recalled the woman saying. “ ‘I’m pregnant now. I really need those pills.’ ”

Taking birth control in secret is not unusual, the women said. Even Aziza’s own husband opposes her using it.

“He said, ‘We are Muslims and God gives us babies,’ ” she said.

She lies to him, but with a clear conscience. “I talked to him in a good way,” she explained. “I told him about the benefits, but he didn’t listen to me.”

Those who oppose it sometimes get violent. Aziza recalled people running her out of a neighborhood in Kabul after she introduced birth control there. They accused her of being on the payroll of the Americans, taking dollars to weaken the country.

“ ‘They want to capture Afghanistan,’ ” she recalled that they said. “ ‘If the Muslims are many, they won’t be able to.’ ”

In Mazar-i-Sharif, it is one mullah at a time.

Mr. Massoom, the mullah trainer, put it most directly. “This is an Islamic country,” he said. “If the clerics support this, no one will oppose it.”

Sangar Rahimi contributed reporting from Mazar-i-Sharif and Kabul.

Notes

¹<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/15/world/asia/15mazar.html?hp>