

The Importance of Voluntary Family Planning

A crucial advancement in the promotion of women's rights is the recognition of their basic reproductive rights. However, a lack of safe, affordable, and effective contraceptives, especially in developing countries, inhibits individuals from voluntary family planning, or the autonomy of deciding when and how often to have responsible pregnancies.

According to the United Nations Population Fund, around 225 million women have unmet needs for contraceptives. As a result, many face miscarriages, pregnancy-related disabilities, maternal deaths, infant deaths, deteriorating health, or other often preventable conditions. A large majority of these people live in the poorest countries (Family Planning). Furthermore, modern contraceptive usage is significantly lower in less developed countries. Only around 20 percent of women in Western and Middle Africa use contraceptive methods, while 75 percent of women in North America use contraceptive methods (Increased Contraceptive Use).

The implications of universal access to contraceptives and family planning services extend far beyond health benefits and a decrease in the number of abortions. Investments in voluntary family planning not only reduces the cost of pregnancy-related care, but also saves governments money— up to six dollars saved for every one dollar spent on contraceptives— which could instead be allocated towards public services like sanitation (Family Planning Strategy Overview).

This is particularly pertinent to vulnerable, poverty-stricken areas with a high demand for contraception and low access. In fact, the annual income a woman could have made but passed up due to pregnancies at a young age make up a significant fraction of the GDP of developing countries with small economies, with as high as 30 percent of the GDP in Uganda (Family

Planning). The effective use of contraceptives early on, resulting in postponed pregnancies and an increase in people in the workforce, can cause growth in economic productivity by billions of dollars.

A key barrier to voluntary family planning is the lack of information; some cultures or families consider contraception to be taboo, resulting in false preconceptions of the risks and consequences of use. Additionally, both men and women who are insufficiently informed about sexual education most likely have inaccurate understandings, if any at all, about modern contraceptive methods. Implementing more comprehensive sexual education programs in schools in developing countries would greatly assist in efforts to not only ensure knowledge and acceptance about reproductive health care, but to destigmatize communication concerning sex and reproduction. Community-based education would specifically target young, vulnerable individuals not in school.

Acquiring more contraceptives to ensure an adequate supply is another highly beneficial solution to meet reproductive needs, but maximizing contraception options must also be prioritized. Given a limited supply or a limited choice of methods, many women refrain from using such due to stigmas, inconvenience, risks, cost, or health conditions (Family Planning Strategy Overview). Investing in modern technology and innovation to create new and improved contraceptives can lead to an increase in usage, and potentially a progression towards acceptance of newer and safer methods.

The capability to make informed decisions regarding reproduction is a fundamental human right. Bearing the responsibility of deciding how many children to have and when, or if at all, is essential to female empowerment and their well-being. This carries weight to the

prosperity of the family, and on a larger scale, the development and economic state of their country.

Citations:

"Family Planning." United Nations Population Fund. United Nations Population Fund, 30 June 2016. Web. 24 Mar. 2017.

"Increased Contraceptive Use Worldwide." Reproductive Health Matters 11.21, Integration of Sexual and Reproductive Health Services: A Health Sector Priority (2015): n. pag. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Web. 24 Mar. 2017.

"Family Planning Strategy Overview." Gates Foundation. Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, n.d. Web. 24 Mar. 2017.