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Pakistan, Malnutrition

Pakistan: Feeding Women's Minds, Bodies, and Futures

1 Introduction: Pakistan is a country in the south of Asia. As of 2020, it is the fifth most populous country in the world (Worldometer, 2020). Officially called the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the government is currently led by Prime Minister Imran Khan, who leads the centrist government established in 2018. As a progressive nationalist, Khan opposes economic inequality and corruption (Britannica, Imran Khan) and believes in developing a welfare state (Farndale, 2007). Khan's priorities could not be more timely, as *CGTN America* reports that "According to the U.N., more than 44 percent of Pakistani children under the age of five suffer from stunted growth due to chronic malnutrition" (*CGTN America*, 2019).

2 Country and Family: Because of Pakistan's location in a "temperate zone," winters are generally cold, and summers are hot. Due to the arid climate, a given location may experience a great difference between its warmest temperature and its coldest during the year (Country Studies, *U.S. Library of Congress*). Pakistan's location and climate also make it quite susceptible to both temperature extremes and natural disasters, like droughts and flooding (Welt Hunger Hilfe, 2018). Its 796,095 square kilometer area (approximately 307,374 square miles) is geographically varied (American Institute of Pakistan Studies).

Among Pakistan's population of more than 221 million people (World Population Review, 2020), more than 60 percent live in rural areas (Trading Economics, 2018). Trading Economics also reports that upwards of 47 percent of Pakistan's land is currently used for agriculture. The country relies heavily on agricultural exports, with crops like wheat, maize, rice, cotton, and sugarcane making up almost 24 percent of its GDP, and approximately half of the working population is employed in the agricultural field (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Other major exports include cars, house linens, refined and crude petroleum, and petroleum gas (Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2017). The average farm in Pakistan spans 5.6 acres, which, due to a variety of factors, is "less than half of what it was back in 1972" (Aazim, 2018).

While farms are a major source of employment in rural locales, much of the urban labor force toils in factories, notably in the textile field, where working conditions are poor and wages low (Human Rights Watch, 2019). The average monthly wage of a Pakistani worker from 2008 to 2018 was 18,754 PKR (CEIC Data), or slightly over \$120 USD in 2020.

The average family in Pakistan is comprised of 6.45 people (*The Express Tribune*, 2017). In rural areas, families either live in "pukka houses," which are built with strong materials like brick, concrete,

timber, cement and stone, “katchi” dwellings, made from less durable components like “mud, bamboo, reeds, or thatch,” or so-called “semi-pukka” shanties built with a combination of the elements used to build pukka and katchi houses (Britannica, Pakistan: Housing).

The typical diet of a Pakistani family includes rice, curries, paratha or roti (types of flatbread), yogurt, chicken, fish, mutton and beef (Gilani Foundation, 2011). Because around 97 percent of Pakistan’s population identify as Muslim (Oxford Islamic Studies), eating certain meats, such as pork, is considered “haram,” which means “forbidden” in Arabic (*Firstpost*, 2018). Pakistanis obtain food from local markets (World Bank, 2019) or, if they grow food, from their own farms. In more industrialized parts of the country, chain grocery stores like Imtiaz Super Market and Utility Store Corporation are a food source for urban citizens (Nordea Trade).

The availability of clean water is also a major concern, as twenty-one million Pakistanis (nearly 10 percent of the total population) do not have access to clean water, according to *Gulf News* (Jamal, 2018). The news outlet also reported in 2018 that Pakistan was ninth on a “list of [the] top 10 countries with [the] lowest access to clean water.” Health and sanitation are also greatly impacted by the lack of toilets, with 72 percent of city dwellers and only 48 percent of the rural population in Pakistan having access to a toilet (Fioriti, 2018).

Due to poor sanitary conditions and the consequences of food and water insecurity, along with many other factors, healthcare is often very much needed but unfortunately is neither very accessible nor affordable for rural populations. In 2019, Hippocrates Med Review, a publication produced by medical students at Johns Hopkins University, cited a lack of “sanitary, modern clinics” and “an inability to pay for the medical bills due to a lack of common health insurance” as factors that prevent the rural population from seeking medical treatment (Abidi, 2019). Families fleeing from poverty, conflict, and natural disasters in parts of Pakistan also suffer the harsh consequences of inadequate healthcare (Relief Web, 2017).

As is the case with offering medical care, Pakistan has long struggled with providing and supporting the education of its youth, particularly for girls. UNICEF reports that 22.8 million children, or 44 percent of the population between the ages of 5 and 16, do not attend school. In any given age group, UNICEF also notes, there are always more boys going to school than girls. “Only 13 percent of girls are still in school by ninth grade,” reported Human Rights Watch in 2018. While the organization acknowledges that many boys are also deprived of an education, they emphasize that “girls are worst affected.”

Electricity is a rare commodity in many rural areas. In 2018, the International Renewable Energy Agency found that “half of the rural population” (*The Express Tribune*, 2018) lacked electricity. When it comes to telephones specifically, the CIA reported in 2018 that only one in a hundred inhabitants has a “fixed” phone or landline, while 69 out of 100 Pakistanis do have a mobile cellular subscription.

Along with the increased presence of electricity, cellular subscriptions, and chain grocery stores, the construction of new roads is another sign that Pakistan is industrializing. In 2017, *The Economist* noted that “The government is building more airports, roads and railways, even though the existing ones are

underused.” The roads that are heavily utilized are often very congested, and travellers may encounter everything from cars to donkeys and horse carts (Country Reports). These conditions are unsafe for people and animals alike. In a proposal about better highways and roads in Pakistan, the Asian Development Bank wrote that though the “quality” of the roadways has advanced, “the overall road condition needs further improvement” (Asian Development Bank, 2014). Roads, as well as local markets, are integral for small farmers and merchants to make a profit. Efforts to strengthen small local food markets, like the Punjab Agriculture and Rural Transformation Program’s goals for the Punjab province, seek to utilize food markets as impactful forces of positive change (The World Bank, 2019). Even with endeavors like this one, many Pakistani families struggle to make ends meet and put nutritious food on the table due to several factors: natural disasters can negatively influence the agriculture industry (a top employer), surplus food is often exported for profit, and maternal malnutrition can subsequently lead to childhood malnutrition and stunting (Future Directions International, 2019).

3 Challenge and Impact: Malnutrition has a sizable impact on both rural and urban populations in Pakistan, with roughly 44 percent of children stunted (*CGTN America*, 2019) and “15 percent suffer[ing] from acute malnutrition” (U.S. Aid, 2019). While trends have improved in the past several decades with child mortality rates and “underweight trends” decreasing, 80 percent of children in Pakistan are still not receiving the nutrients and quantities of food needed for an all-around nutritious diet (UNICEF, 2018). Though Pakistan has surplus crop levels, high export rates and an early halt to breastfeeding are large contributors to malnourishment. Additionally, women’s malnutrition makes it not only harder for them to breastfeed their babies, but also starts children off at a disadvantage because it limits their vital first source of nutrients (World Health Organization, 2017).

Minimal healthcare and poor hygiene only exacerbate the impacts of malnutrition, and education about these two factors among much of the rural population is lacking. Many Pakistanis marry young, especially girls. Nearly 50 percent of women are married by the time they are nineteen, reports Shirkat Gah, a human rights group. Sometimes, in particular rural parts of the country, “girls as young as thirteen are forced into arranged marriages” (*The Tribune*, 2014).

4 Solutions & Recommendations: I propose that several actions be taken in order to impede the impact of malnutrition on the Pakistani population.

4.1 First, supporting and supplementing the education of all children, but specifically girls, could have considerable impact on levels of malnutrition in more impoverished areas. I suggest incentivizing secondary education, an initiative which was successful in increasing the number of children attending secondary school in Bangladesh. In 2017, the World Bank reported that Bangladesh’s Secondary Education Quality and Access Enhancement Project (SEQAEP) was providing over 10 million secondary students (54 percent of them girls) with stipends for attending school, ranging between “\$15 and \$40 a year” based on the grades the children receive. Poor families may need teenagers to bring home a wage or help out with the family farm or business, and the prospect of smaller household earnings can often be enough to deter families from sending their children to school. Incentives like those offered in Bangladesh can suffice in giving families a choice and students the opportunity to attend school. This solution could be funded by international organizations like the United Nations Population Fund and UNICEF. After

demonstrating the benefits of this solution, the progressive government would hopefully be inclined to reallocate money and resources toward educating girls. By introducing a program that Pakistan's social welfare-friendly government may be open to seriously considering, millions of Pakistani children could be afforded a long term education. Most importantly, I would suggest that the incentives for girls increase each year from the age of fourteen onwards, so that their guardians are more likely to keep them in school until the age of eighteen at least (thus also avoiding marriage and pregnancy in the early/mid-teens. This also has the additional benefit of being a "non-traditional" method to prevent pregnancy, which aligns with the Gates Foundation's pursuit of outside-the-box family planning strategies). The World Food Programme reports "a strong correlation between girls' level of education and all forms of undernutrition," so this step could significantly reduce malnutrition levels among the Pakistani population.

4.2 Second, I would urge the introduction of "freekeh" to the Pakistani diet. Freekeh is a roasted grain that is made from young or green wheat, a crop that is already grown in Pakistan. Sometimes called "farik," it contains plenty of calcium, zinc, and iron. While all are important in a wholesome diet, freekeh's iron content is especially relevant to Pakistan, where approximately 68 percent of the population suffers from iron deficiency anemia, as noted by a 2016 situational study written by Aga Khan University professors. The study emphasizes that women in Pakistan are much more severely impacted than men: 56 percent of pregnant women and 44 percent of non-pregnant women suffer from anemia. Children also experience the condition at high rates, while only 12 percent of men do. Not only would freekeh boost iron levels, but it also fights digestive problems, supports good eye health and muscle strength, aids digestion (Axe, 2016), and is better for the heart and gut (Freekeh Foods). Because it is made with wheat that has not had the time to fully grow yet, "freekeh retains more nutrients than wheat harvested when it's mature," which gives the consumer a meal full of fiber, vitamins, protein and minerals (Freekeh Foods). Aside from all of its health benefits, wheat is a crop that is grown across Pakistan, but could just be harvested a bit earlier to retain more nutrients. It can also serve as a substitute or supplement to the Pakistani food staple, rice. Another large part of the diet is chapati bread (Reference.com). This can be made using flour made from young wheat as well (so-called "green flour"), which would make bread, a carbohydrate, into a food filled with fibers and minerals. If freekeh could be paired with rice and a little bit of green flour was used when making chapati, this multi-beneficial grain could play a major role in reducing malnutrition.

The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars wrote in a 2010 report that low birth weight in Pakistan can be a strong indicator of future malnutrition and stunting. Additionally, low birth weight in Pakistan often occurs as a result of mothers who are malnourished themselves, both while they were young themselves and during their own pregnancies. If mothers were to get more nutrients throughout their pregnancy, it would give their babies a better chance of being born at a healthy weight and hence less vulnerable to malnutrition and disease. Freekeh could, if paired with better prenatal care for Pakistani mothers, potentially provide a source of nutrition that prevents maternal malnutrition, reduces the number of babies born at low weights, and lessens subsequent childhood malnutrition levels.

4.3 Finally, I recommend the promotion of breastfeeding that starts at birth and continues for an extended time period as a solution for malnutrition. Breastfeeding is a free and effective way to "significantly

reduce stunting in Pakistan” (World Health Organization, 2017). A recent report found that only 18 percent of Pakistani mothers carry out “Early initiation breastfeeding,” but breastfeeding exclusively until the baby is six months old makes them “14 times more likely to survive than” babies who are not breastfed (World Health Organization, 2017). As referenced earlier, approximately 97 percent of the Pakistani population practice Islam, and their religious text, the Qur’an or Koran, supports breastfeeding. According to a study published by the *International Journal of Current Research and Academic Review*, there are multiple references in the Qur’an to the importance and value of breastfeeding (Mehdi Dehghani Firoozabadi and Mohammed Ali Sheikhi). The Qur’an states, for example, in verse 15 of Sura Ahqaf, that babies carried to full term should be breastfed for a minimum of 21 months, and that premature babies should be breastfed even longer to make up for their early births. Mohammad, the Prophet, says that “for the baby, no milk is better than breastfeed” and the respected Imam (religious leader) Baqir noted that “it is best for children to stay in the mother’s arms and grow by breastfeeding” (Firoozabadi and Sheikhi, 2004). Educating Pakistanis on not just the health gains but also the Qur’an’s strong support for this source of nutrition could lead to a positive uptick in the percentage of babies being breastfed in this supermajority Muslim country, thus giving them a better chance to live long, healthy lives. I would recommend the teaching of this not only in schools, but also at food markets and vocational and community centers (similar breastfeeding education around the world is sponsored by organizations like La Leche League and the Global Breastfeeding Collective).

4.4 Implementation of Solutions: In order to effectively introduce and implement the aforementioned solutions, it is critical that Pakistan’s societal customs and tendencies are taken into consideration. Now, as in the past, many remote and rural communities are “tribalism-dominated” societies. While “tribalism in medieval times had a value to organise people in communities,” (Khan, 2018) having a group of tribal elders or a single village leader deciding on important matters pertaining to the citizens of that particular village gives these individuals a more tangible power than that of the seemingly faraway Prime Minister and federal government. Oftentimes, local religious leaders (imams) also have significant influence in these communities, given the high percentage of observant Muslims. Getting the approval and cooperation of both religious and village leaders is a crucial step if these recommendations are to be successfully put into action, because even if the federal government has these priorities in mind, the solutions must be bolstered by support at the local level.

Since patriarchy is also “deeply embedded into Pakistani society” (Saleem, 2019), the need for local approval might require further initiatives that focus on communicating the myriad potential benefits of these programs. Due to Pakistan’s patriarchal history, it is pivotal that the fathers, uncles, husbands and brothers of the women and girls support, for example, supplementing their academics and the promotion of breastfeeding education. Given the above-mentioned evidence suggesting that such practices could have immeasurable impacts on the health and wellbeing of entire villages and communities, advocates for the program will have an arsenal of information to draw from when they go to village leaders, imams, and the men in these local communities. In other words, the objective would be empowering men to empower women.

5 Conclusion: Through this combination of incentivizing girls’ education, introducing freekeh to the diet,

and promoting the importance of breastfeeding, malnutrition in Pakistan has the potential to become much more manageable. While funding from humanitarian organizations will be necessary at first, hopefully these steps will lead to a future in which Pakistan can become independent in combating and alleviating malnutrition. These solutions have also been developed through thorough research as to their cultural sensitivity, and have been adjusted and specified based on Pakistan's social norms.

Giving females access to further education through incentives and emphasizing the value of breastfeeding, along with introducing freekeh as a food source, puts the power to improve malnutrition levels in the hands of women. With education, women will have the knowledge to take care of their families and contribute to household income. Through breastfeeding, women can ensure that their children receive vital proteins, carbohydrates and vitamins (American Pregnancy Association, 2019) at a time when babies' immune systems and bodies are especially vulnerable. Finally, by incorporating freekeh into their cooking, women have the ability to give their families meals full of iron, proteins, and minerals. The possible results are many and impactful. As Dr. James Emmanuel Kwegyir-Aggrey, a teacher and missionary, said, "If you educate a man, you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman, you educate a nation."

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