

# Strategic Analysis Paper

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## Demographics in South Asia to 2030: The Status of Women and Sustainable Population Growth

**Benjamin Walsh**

*Research Analyst*

*Global Food and Water Crisis Research Programme*

### Key Points

- Across all countries in South Asia, populations are set to grow significantly out to 2030.
- Though large populations are often conflated with significant economic growth, South Asian countries must not assume this relationship is a universally applicable one.
- Monitoring fertility rates by investing in family planning programmes, education and employment opportunities are needed so that population growth does not outstrip the economy's ability to sustain it.
- Women must be better utilised to ensure population growth is sustainable; improving female job opportunities and making it easier for women to start families later reduces fertility rates and ensures countries extrapolate the maximum economic potential from its existing working population.

### Summary

By 2030, South Asia will likely host around 2.1 billion people. A challenge facing the region will be ensuring populations grow at a sustainable rate. Population growth can equal economic growth, but only if both are managed appropriately. For countries to achieve economically sustainable population growth they must introduce social policies that reduce birth rates and reduce infant mortality; small families must be encouraged over large ones and parenting should commence later. Culturally, South Asians still aim to produce relatively large families; a crude form of insurance against [high child mortality](#). Smaller families reduce the dependency ratio, freeing up the working population to maximise economic growth, provided the right social and economic policies are in place.

By 2030, the empowerment of women should be a priority policy focus throughout South Asia. Women must have their ability to influence small families and they need to be supported by better access to birth control and health services. Furthermore, employment and education opportunities must be made more available to women and girls. This has the dual effect of delaying marriage and child bearing while simultaneously unlocking the economic potential.

## Analysis

### India

India's current population is roughly 1.3 billion people. According to the US Census Bureau and the UN Population Division, India is expected to have a population of about 1.5 billion people by 2030, majority of which is expected to be [young](#). The working-age portion of the population (15-64 years of age) is set to grow more than the overall population; in 2030, about 68% of the population will be work capable. India could perhaps be the youngest country in the world by 2020, which means the economy could experience significant growth given the expanded business community and the enlarged pool of buyers and sellers of goods and services. Roughly 250 million people may enter the Indian work force by 2030, which means more people earning and disposing of incomes. Many believe that India is primed to exploit its [demographic dividend](#), however, this not a given.

For India to sustain economic growth out to 2030 and into the long term, more new jobs need to be created, and the country's working culture must be overhauled to improve female employment and responsible family planning to control population growth. India has recently been experiencing relatively [high](#) economic growth; however, this has not translated to high job growth. Government hesitation is mainly to blame. As [The Economist](#) discusses, creating new jobs means getting rid of old ones and Indian decision makers have been unwilling to do this. India's working-age population will see 125 million new workers added over the next decade and 103 million more post 2030. A lack of jobs and a young, working-age population could be [destabilising](#). Employment will be a long-term challenge for India, which is why population growth must not exceed the economy's ability to sustain it. India must ensure women are able to fill the millions of new jobs that will clearly need to be made to ensure economic growth continues. Reason being, as India attempts to utilise its increasingly knowledge-based working population, it must ensure women, who are proven [boons](#) in information based workplaces, are empowered to seek employment. Furthermore, better female employment equals more sustainable population growth. A recent [study](#) found that more job opportunities in call centres led to more girls delaying starting a family. For India to achieve its demographic dividend, a [gradual](#) decline in fertility rates needs to be sustained. Women having fewer children later on in life will slow population growth to manageable levels, providing women the chance to explore employment opportunities and medical solutions to healthy childbearing.

### Pakistan

Pakistan's current population is around 189 million people. The population could increase by about 30% from today's levels and reach 245 million people by 2030. Like India, Pakistan is poised to be a young country out to 2030, with almost three quarters of the population aged 40 years or younger by 2030. Pakistan, however, despite its youthful population, may not experience its demographic dividend to its fullest extent because of government idleness. Many believe that the central government has allowed the population to grow unfettered, instead of restricting growth and matching it to the economy's ability to sustain it. A [report](#) by the Pakistani newspaper *Dawn* harrowingly stated that 'Pakistan's population explosion may become a threat to the very existence of the nation.' [Pakistan](#) is not prepared, in terms of jobs and industry, for the massive strain the booming population will have on the country's resources. Investing in women, however, could ease

population growth out to 2030 and onto 2050. Pakistan's population is young (aged 15-24 and about 56 per cent of the population in 2014) increasingly urban, better educated and in possession of a lower fertility rate. Despite these positives, an unequal investment trend in women prevents Pakistan from utilising these benefits. Pakistani women want to work; about [40 per cent](#) of unemployed women say they want a job. Women are mainly bound to the home, which is why to arrest the increasingly unsustainable population rate, women must be provided with more employment opportunities to prevent families from starting too early. Furthermore, investments in family planning must be made in conjunction. Family planning is thought of only after women have four to five children because of the uncertainty surrounding child survivability. Women will spread births out, and will have fewer children, if they are assured of their survival. For Pakistan to slow its population rise down, women must be helped delay childbearing. Women claim to want to space birthing out, but have no access to contraceptives to do this. Educating young girls, opening up more job opportunities and improving access to contraceptives will lower the fertility rate and unleash the economic potential of women in Pakistan.

### **Sri Lanka**

The current population is around 20.9 million people and is expected to peak at 21.9 million by 2031, according to the [World Bank](#). Unlike India and Pakistan, Sri Lanka's population is expected to get older out to 2030. The demographic dividend, which is currently underway, was estimated to have slowed significantly by 2017, but [some](#) believe the country has until 2037 to exploit the dividend. A major challenge facing Sri Lanka is its [aging population](#) and a resurgent fertility trend that are set to combine and increase the dependency ratio. The Central Bank of Sri Lanka outlined in a [report](#) that attracting more women into the workplace is needed to cushion the impact of an increasingly dependent population. By 2030, Sri Lanka is expected to be undergoing a demographic transition from a dividend era to an ageing population era, with one in four expected to be 60 years old or more. Since the government does not provide pensions, the existing workforce needs to provide steady economic growth to sustain themselves, and for an increasingly dependent population. Improving female labour participation is crucial in this respect. Furthermore, a [rising fertility rate](#) needs to be slowed. [Reports](#) (and [here](#)) issued recently point out that Sri Lanka's fertility rate must be addressed immediately. Even though males and females have the same level of educational attainment, female unemployment is double that of men. Improving access to contraceptives and opening women to employment delays childbearing which lowers the dependency ratio and allows for a smoother demographic transition.

### **Bangladesh**

Bangladesh's present population is around 164 million people, with this number expected to rise to 186 million people by 2030. Economically and socially speaking, Bangladesh has made developments, but its growing population could negatively impact the country's progress. Though Bangladesh has done well to reduce fertility rates, the population is possibly set to grow to about 250 million by 2050 unless fertility rates can be reduced to levels never before seen. A long term challenge will be combining sustainable population growth and reforms that maximise economic gains from the existing population, while taking measures to plan for an ageing population. According to the *Journal of Health, Population and Nutrition*, the number of elderly people will increase six-fold by 2050 while the number of those eligible to work will decrease. Over the years, Bangladesh has seen [improvements in life expectancy](#) which could increase the role of the public to finance the ever increasing number of retirees. Despite some success emanating from family planning programmes, Bangladesh has an obsession with the short-term, which riddles attempts to prolong marriage and reduce the fertility rate. In Bangladesh over one third of girls are married before the age of 15 and 66 per cent of girls are married before turning 18. Half of all teenage girls have at least one child. Contraceptives

are then used after child birth, but this does not negate the fact that poor family planning has led to the creation of large, resource draining families and the loss of a potential economic asset (the young women). Allowing women to explore employment options and contribute an income to the family enables them to put more money into better schooling and health care services. Entering the work force and improved access to better health care enables women the choice to delay starting a family. Having a choice means women are [more likely](#) to space births out. A lower child death and birth rate slows population growth, decreases the dependency ratio and frees up more resources to care for the increasingly aging population.

## Nepal

The current population of Nepal is around 29 million and is likely to reach 38 million by 2030. The country had its demographic dividend start around 1991, with its completion projected for the year 2046. A challenge facing the country will be preparing for when Nepal transitions to an “ageing population” in 2028 (65 years old and over, and seven per cent of the population) and then onto an “aged population” in 2054 (65 years old and over, and 14 per cent of the population). Nepal thus has a small window of opportunity to ensure adequate amounts of investment have been made in young people, especially children, so that they can be more productive than their parents are at present to care not only for themselves, but an increasingly ageing population out to 2030. To put the situation into perspective, France had roughly 115 years to go from an ageing to an aged society; Nepal has approximately one fourth of that time (about 28 years). Due to declining birth and death rates and improved life expectancy Nepal has avoided uncontrollable population growth and economic stagnation. With this base established, the country must focus on investing more in children. According to the latest CIA World Factbook Data, the zero-14 age bracket (30.93 percent of population) is the second largest section of Nepalese society. For Nepal to exploit its demographic dividend to its end date, children in the zero-14 age bracket must have appropriate educational, health and employment opportunities. As the working population (currently the largest portion of the population) transitions to a post-working status, it must be ensured that today’s zero-14 year olds can not only sustain themselves, but also the ageing population. The country must make utilising the economic potential of its existing population a priority so that when elderly people start outweighing working-age people, the latter is able to support them.

## Bhutan

Bhutan’s current population is around 770,000 people, with this figure expected to rise to approximately 886,000 by 2030. Bhutan will likely experience a population boom out to 2030 and onto 2050 because of the increases in [life expectancy](#) coupled with the countries decreasing child [mortality rate](#). Most of the population resides in the pre-reproductive and reproductive stages, meaning Bhutan will see a steady rise in its population out to 2030, but also the added possibility of an enlarged post-reproductive age (45 years of age +) section of society over the long term to 2050. Population rise is one of Bhutan’s greatest challenges leading out to 2030. The population is expected to double in about four decades even after achieving replacement level fertility, which it was expected to have done in 2012. The high fertility rate, the low use of contraceptives and the relatively young population (the largest [portion](#) of the population is in the 25-54 years section) means that Bhutan has what a government [report](#) says is ‘inbuilt potential for rapid population growth’. A rising population likely to span over several decades will stress government efforts to provide what it can to lift its people’s standards of living. It is possible that Bhutan could face a similar situation to Nepal, where by 2030, the country is facing high population growth, an increasingly aging population and, as a result, a pre-reproductive (zero-14) age bracket that must be more economically productive than their parents ever were. Job creation must be a central focal point. At present the country’s public sector is struggling to expand, however, a relatively small and underdeveloped [private sector](#) could prove a future

growth engine. The government must ensure that private sector growth features throughout its future Five-Year Development Plans.

## **Afghanistan**

Afghanistan's current population is approximately 34 million, with this figure expected to grow to 48 million by 2030. One of Afghanistan's greatest development challenges will be in managing its ever growing population levels, which can be blamed on a cultural demand for large families and the high fertility rate. Afghanistan has one of the highest fertility rates in South Asia. If the CIA's [World Factbook](#) is to be trusted, Afghanistan's total fertility rate is 5.22 children born per woman. Having a high fertility rate makes it difficult to improve the population's levels of health care and education, because it increases the dependency ratio and takes the economic potential of women of the work force. Though the fertility rate is expected to decline (2.7 by 2030) it is impossible to ignore the fact that Afghanistan will find it extremely difficult to manage such a rapidly unsustainable population out to that date. Within the years leading up to 2030, Afghanistan will likely experience a [youth bulge](#), given its cultural inclination to have large families. These bulges are not inherently bad; countries with suitable health care, employment opportunities for men and women and access to birth control are able to accommodate the economic potential of the increasing population. But a country like Afghanistan, whose patriarchal social structure limits the birthing options of females, poor [health care](#), widening inequality and an inability to meet even basic needs are issues that appear difficult to solve even in today's climate. Unless the obsession with large families can be curbed, Afghanistan's long-term demographic outlook looks tough to manage.

## **Conclusion**

Giving women more employment, health and education opportunities leads to smaller, more sustainable families which bode well for future population growth. Rampant population growth should be a major concern for many countries in South Asia, if only because of the massive strain it will have on the economy, food resources, water supplies and the environment. Population growth is a fact of life South Asia is going to have to manage out to 2030. How this population growth is allowed to occur, however, is a policy area South Asia can negotiate. The region needs to consider carefully about how it utilises and develops its female population.

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80 Birdwood Parade, Dalkeith WA 6009, Australia.  
Tel: +61 8 9389 9831 Fax: +61 8 9389 8803  
Web: [www.futuredirections.org.au](http://www.futuredirections.org.au)