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Population and Reproductive Health in India: An Assessment of the Current Situation and Future Needs

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In the past ten years, India has experienced its lowest decade-long population growth rate since Independence in 1947 along with unprecedented demographic gains. Rapidly shifting demographic trends, including impressive reductions in fertility coupled with falling unmet need for contraception and significant reductions in infant and early childhood mortality, have produced a demographic dividend. These demographic shifts have been paralleled by significant advances in literacy and the narrowing of gender gaps in education, and some improvements in reproductive health, including increases in skilled attendance at delivery. Significant shifts in the dependency ratio have given India a unique opportunity for economic growth, and the country is now at a demographic crossroads. Continued investment in programs related to population and reproductive health can potentially assist India in continued demographic progress and push the country into the later stages of the demographic transition, although much work remains to be done. Maternal mortality, poverty, reproductive rights, and gender equity all remain areas of concern and need urgent attention if India is to reap the rewards of its recent demographic progress.

In *Population and Reproductive Health in India*, the four authors provide a thorough and intelligent overview of the current status of India's demography and reproductive health. In detailing the history of these trends in India, they illustrate a century of demographic change and gains. Combining information on programmatic developments and investments with data from the National Family Health Surveys (NFHS) (supported by census and other data sources), the authors have produced perhaps the most holistic outline of India's demographic landscape to date. The authors also make careful evidence-based recommendations for future programmatic and research focuses.

The opening chapter, by K.G. Santhya and Shireen Jejeebhoy ("Setting the Stage"), outlines current and recent policy efforts. Covering everything from the "National Policy for the Empowerment of Women" (2001) and the "Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act" (1994) to the recent "Five-Year Plans" (2012–17), this chapter describes the policy context in which the trends outlined in later chapters have taken place. Chapter 2 ("The Population and Development Scenario in India"), by P.M. Kulkarni, focuses on trends in population and development, describing demographic patterns from 1901 through the most recent census in 2011. Covering population growth rates, dependency ratios, migration rates, and population projections, Kulkarni uses a variety of data sources to provide a holistic view of India's recent demographic history. The chapter discusses population and demographic issues including sex selection and food security, couching these carefully as the key concerns in India's demographic future.

Each of the remaining chapters examines a specific demographic or reproductive health issue: sexual and reproductive health, adolescents and youth, women's empowerment and gender equity, and the role of partners. All of the chapters follow the same general structure: a review of key policies and programmatic efforts, a comprehensive overview of recent history, and the current status of key indicators. Particularly impressive is the reporting on the policy and programmatic landscape. For example, in "Adolescents and Youth in India: Challenges

and Opportunities,” Santhya and Jejeebhoy divide policies into those for out-of-school and in-school youth and divide programs into those focused on nutrition, gender disparities, and educational or vocational attainment. Within each category, the authors describe the genesis and content of the policy, as well as trends and patterns in key indicators, allowing the reader to appreciate the synergy between policy, program, and population-level outcomes. A discussion of outstanding areas of concern for each thematic area is also included, as is an outline of future challenges. The barriers to future success in each area are summarized in the final chapter, “Moving Forward,” which makes strong, evidence-based (if not entirely surprising) recommendations for policy and programmatic action.

Some sections of the book could benefit from more attention. For a text that rests so heavily on data to describe trends and patterns, there is a curious lack of examination of data quality. Central to each chapter is a detailed presentation of key indicators, yet there is almost no reporting of any evidence, or the authors’ views, regarding the quality of the data being presented. This appears to be a missed opportunity to call for greater attention to improving measurement and data quality. Also lacking is a detailed description of the cultural forces that shape many of the demographic and reproductive health patterns reported. Whereas issues such as early and child marriage or female autonomy are discussed, the cultural roots of these issues are largely overlooked. Many readers will undoubtedly want to know more about why these issues continue to prevail. By the authors’ own admission, the book is light on some areas of sexual health, particularly HIV/AIDS, and makes no mention of vulnerable sexual and gender minority groups and their place in India’s demographic and reproductive health profile.

These weaknesses are far outweighed by the book’s numerous significant strengths. Through the careful use of key data sources and a thorough description of policy, the text provides one of the most complete reviews of India’s demographic and reproductive health. For those wanting to understand India’s demographic profile, the book offers all the necessary facts and figures, while for those looking to understand the policy environment, it clearly outlines current and recent policies while offering thoughtful comments on areas needing further attention.

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