**Where should young people go?**

Kamila Hyat

Thursday, Jul 20, 2023

Pakistan is the fifth most populous country in the world. This is hardly good news for a nation that struggles to feed at least a third of its population with the resources it has. Child malnutrition and stunting is extremely high. In Sindh, stunting has affected almost 50 per cent of the children.

This year, Pakistan conducted its first-ever digital census. The country’s chief census commissioner tells us that our population stands at 249,566,743. This is obviously far too many. And though there are regions which are relatively sparse in population, this really does not help given how urban centres and other parts of the country where amenities, opportunity and employment exist are overcrowded.

Over 58.7 per cent of the total population are young people. For some countries, this would mean something to celebrate, but Pakistan has created a situation where there is very little for our youth to do. Yes, the best can get into reputable institutions such as Lums, the IBA, GIK, etc that hold a promise of jobs. But for the majority, the future is limited to secondary education, if any at all and only a few manage to complete higher education. The state of our higher education has been commented on several times by top educationists who point out the levels of plagiarism in PhD papers and the poor standards of output from students putting out dissertations at this level. We ask then: what is to become of our youth?

Given the way things stand, it is hardly surprising that we see a rise in street crime, most notably in Karachi but also in other cities. Car and mobile phone snatching, ATM theft and other financial scams have become the norm. Most people are desperate for money. They simply do not have the training required to acquire jobs. In comparison to this, young people of India have access to countless opportunities that allow them to keep growing. India’s networks of IITs, which now recruit from around the world, have given the Indian youth a huge amount of prestige, and brought top companies to India to look for graduates who can then head top organizations in the fields of IT, computer science, etc.

We of course did not think of this way back when our country was born. As a result, we are now in a situation where every woman in the country gives birth to an average of 3.6 children, the highest average in South Asia. This can be compared to the two children, which is the average for Indian women. We need to halt the population growth and this can only happen through a distinct change in policy.

In the first place, we need to provide young people in schools with the right education at the right level delivered in the correct fashion to help them understand that more children will not benefit them, the children who are born to them or the country. We need to be far more open about the means and ways for accessing contraception for both men and women.

For women in particular, lack of access to contraception is said to be one of the main reasons why they continue to conceive children and go into an average that nears three per household even today. The policies have been badly flawed since the time Pakistan was created, and they remain flawed today.

In the meantime, we also need to think about what to do with the young people who are now present in the country. We cannot simply wish them away. Nor can we continue to see the repeat of the Greece boat tragedy where hundreds of Pakistan lost their lives after the ship carrying them to Italy sank off the coast of Greece. Some future has to be found for them. There is no point in suggesting that they set up startups or other small businesses. Yes, it may be possible for some to consider setting up vending carts or other similar enterprises. But many who are more educated would wish to do more than this, given the money invested by their families in the years of learning.

The question for the country then is what to do with these youngsters. Perhaps we need to hold a forum and bring in professors and students from top institutions to suggest what kind of enterprises can be set up to employ young people at all levels and give them some kind of future in the country. At present they appear to have none. Too many of them are aware of this. And this, of course, is the reason why more left the country in 2022 than in the previous year. The fact that so many are willing to leave illegally after paying out millions of rupees to agents also point to the fact that the young know they do not have a future here.

Other countries have come up with solutions to solve the same problem that Pakistan faces. Bangladesh for example has initiated a massive scheme of micro-credit especially for women and young people to create jobs and supplement family incomes. Other countries have found ways to ensure young people do not remain jobless and unemployed for year after year. In some nations, there have been schemes to train youngsters as chefs, caterers, paramedics, and teachers to improve their skills.

We will need to come up with innovative methods to try and find means to make young people, who have a limited set of skills and a very limited horizon, more versatile so that they can easily land decent jobs. These schemes must also extend to the rural area of the country and more far-flung places where young people can be trained as guides, rescue workers, travel companions who can take groups out on tours in organized car journeys, and so on. There is plenty of potential, it just needs to be built upon.

The reality is that we have extremely talented young people amongst us. But unfortunately they have no opportunity to display their skills or intelligence. With good training and better vocational education, many could go into fields like engineering or help run factories and other similar places. This is also one factor hampering the entry of business from overseas into the country.

The reality is that nations like Bangladesh and Vietnam have more educated, trained and skilled youth able to run workshops and similar outfits compared to us. For this reason, outside nations looking to set up businesses in poorer countries, mainly to make use of cheap labour, choose our neighbouring countries. We need to look into this problem as a crisis.

Pakistan cannot sustain a population so large and so unskilled. This is of course especially true of women who get even less opportunity to develop their learning or receive training which can gain them jobs and perhaps help their children remain off the streets. The problem is a critical one and cannot be ignored any longer. From what the census shows we must act and act quickly to stop our population from growing further and literally going beyond what the country can offer them in terms of resources and help.

The writer is a freelance columnist and former newspaper editor. She can be reached at:

kamilahyat@hotmail.com