

More women in poor countries use contraception, says report

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More women and girls in poor countries are using modern contraception, signifying progress in efforts to involve women in family planning, according to a report released Monday.

The number of women and girls using contraceptives in 69 of the world's poorest countries surpassed 317 million in 2018, representing 46 million more users than in 2012, said the report by Family Planning 2020, a U.N.-backed global advocacy group working to promote rights-based family planning.

Access to modern contraception helped prevent over 119 million unintended pregnancies and averted 20 million unsafe abortions between July 2017 and July 2018, although populations continue to soar across Africa and other Third World countries, the report said.

"The best way to overcome this challenge of rapid population growth is by giving women and girls (the) opportunity to decide how many children they want to have," Beth Schlachter, executive director of Family Planning 2020, told The Associated Press.

The mix of contraceptive methods has improved significantly in 20 of the surveyed countries, "meaning that more women are able to find the short-term, long-acting, emergency, or permanent method that suits their needs and preferences," the report said.

But even as millions of poor women use contraceptives, millions more who want to delay or prevent pregnancy are still unable to access it, often due to lack of information, the report said, citing perceived health side-effects and social disapproval as deterrents.

Under Family Planning 2020, which grew out of a summit on family planning held in London in 2012, donors have pledged millions of dollars to bring contraception to 120 million more women and girls in developing countries by the year 2020.

Many of the 69 countries surveyed for the report are in sub-Saharan Africa, which is witnessing a population boom even as other parts of the

world see dropping birth rates. Over half of the global population growth between now and 2050 will take place in Africa, according to U.N. figures.

According to the new report, contraceptive use is growing fastest in Africa, even though the region's fertility rates remain high.

The most recent U.N. global population report estimates Africa's fertility rate to be 5.1 births per woman.

Because the region's growing population is not backed by substantial rises in family incomes and the development of public infrastructure, there are concerns that a population boom may deepen poverty levels for many Africans.

Over the years, family planning has often been difficult to sell in heavily paternalistic sub-Saharan Africa, with the matter becoming controversial as some African leaders challenge the view that a growing population is bad for the world's poorest continent.

Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni insists Africa needs more people, and has lambasted what he calls "the shrill cries of NGOs about population control."

In February President John Magufuli of Tanzania encouraged polygamy, citing the 10 million more women than men in his country in advising men to marry "two or more wives" to reduce the number of single women.

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