

An Assessment of the Place of Child Spacing/Birth Control in Islam

AMINA MUHAMMAD SANI

Al-Qalam University, Katsina, Katsina State, Nigeria

Abstract. Child spacing is a concept used in place of birth control so that the programme of birth control can find acceptability among Muslim population. The paper attempts to examine the concept of child spacing and the arguments contained therein. The idea is to look at the concept of child spacing from the western/conventional point of view. The Islamic perspective of what is understood by child spacing has been highlighted, relying on relevant hadith and Qur'anic provisions. Finally the paper concludes by rejecting the idea of child spacing/birth control based on western model. Rather the paper argues in favour of child spacing from the Islamic point of view based on 'azl' and the Islamic model of child rearing and weaning as supported by relevant Qur'anic verses cited.

1. Introduction

Child spacing/birth control has been a subject of debate among Muslims and Muslim scholars alike. There are those who see any attempt at birth control as abominable. While others allow it and some with some conditions. It is in the light of the importance child spacing can play in our family life that an attempt to examine the arguments with a view to making a modest contribution to the debate. This is seen as necessary because as Muslims we owe it a duty to inform, enlighten and educate on any issue that affects the wellbeing of Muslims. This is more so when the issue of spacing has become a household talk among Muslims and the government recognizing the need for child spacing. This is why we find in almost all our general hospitals across the country there is a department dealing with the issue of child spacing/control. This is under the name Planned Parenthood Federation. The purpose of this department is to educate married couples on the need for child spacing/control. The need which according

to them is for the welfare of the couple especially the woman who carries the burden of pregnancy. On the economic aspect they argue that child spacing enables parents make adequate plans for their children so that they can be well brought up. In fact some see it as a panacea to our economic predicament (Allman, 1978).

1.1 Abbreviation and Definition of Terms

SWT - Subhanahu Wata'ala – Glory be to Him

SAW - Sallahu Alihi wassalam – May peace and blessing of Allah be upon Him.

Ahadith - Plural of Hadith

Hadith - Saying, actions and tacit approval of the prophet

'Azl' - Is an Arabic word meaning the withdrawal of man's private part from the woman, while in the process of intercourse, in order to avoid ejaculation inside the woman.

2. Concept of Child Spacing/Birth Control

A number of scholars have tried to define the concept of child spacing/control. Malthus sees birth control as a panacea of the economic problem of our societies. He sees it as a conscious actions taken by individual couples to regulate the number of children spacing in accordance with their personal preference (Allman, 1978). Margret in Gray (1979:225) sees it as the infertility therapy between the birth of one child and another. According to her the spacing can take a period of two or even more years, depending upon the wishes of the couples involved. Hornby (1974:83) defines birth control as the method of preventing unwanted conception. Robert et al., (1998:303) see child spacing as a process of giving interval on child birth between couples and the spacing they take depending on the interest of the

couples. Also Delano (1998:22) view family planning as a means by which couples space the process of conception, pregnancy and child birth at intervals mutually determined by both. In another vein Omran (1922:4) argues that family planning is the use of conceptive methods by a husband and wife with mutual agreement between them to regulate their fertility with a view to warding off health, social and economic hardship.

2.1 Child Spacing/Birth Control: The Islamic Perspective

Having highlighted the concept of child spacing from the western perspective it is pertinent to understand child spacing from the Islamic point of view. According to Khalid (2006:2) the principle of preventing conception was adopted by some companions of the noble Prophet Muhammad (SAW). This means giving it Islamic legal backing. Some of the ahadith cited are:

“According to Jabir (R.A) we used to practice “Azl” in the prophet life time while the Quran was being revealed”. (Muslim).

Umar b. Khattab (R.A) *“The prophet (saw) forbids the practice of “Azl” with a free woman except with her permission.* (Ibn Majar).

Anas (R.A) *“A man asked the Prophet (SAW) about “Azl” and the prophet (SAW) said “even if you spill a seed from which a child was meant to be born on a rock Allah will bring from rock a child”.* (Muslim).

From what has been cited in the foregoing ahadith, it is clear that Islam is a holistic religion covering every aspect of the lives of Muslims. This is to say that, yes, Islam makes provision for the child spacing but not in accordance with the western handout. Islam has made provision that child spacing should be based on ‘azl’ no more no less. This was practiced even during the time of the prophet when the Quran was being revealed. The important thing for Muslims to consider when pursuing child spacing is to adhere to the shari’ah. As Bukhari reported in al-Nawawi (1994:1340).

“What is lawful is clear and what is unlawful too is clear but between them are issues which are controversial”.

Therefore child spacing which is substituting the open challenged birth control should be handled with care by Muslims. Whether child spacing is allowed by Islam the ahadith and relevant Quranic provisions are there to guide the Muslims. In fact the shari’ah provision of spacing is clear. The Quranic provision has strengthened the provision by ahadith with regard to child spacing the Quran says.

“And mothers shall give such to their children for two whole years, this is for those who desire to complete the sucking (Quran 46:15)

In another provision Allah says:

“... the carrying of the (child) and his weaning” (a period) thirty months at length when he realizes the age of full strength”. (Quran 46:15)

Also Allah (SWT) says:

“And we have enjoined on man concerning his mother bears him in weakness and his weaning takes two years (Quran 31:14).

From the above Quranic verses it is clear that Muslims need not follow the western method of child spacing. The shari’ah is complete with regards to child spacing. In view of the fact that the birth, rearing and weaning of a child follow a definite time chart and if followed with a period of 2 years for weaning a child and the onset of another pregnancy it means a gap of at least two years with the next child. From this it is clear that the Quranic arrangement represents vital aspects of child spacing being propagated by the Planned Parenthood Federation of Nigeria. Therefore if we comply with the provision of the ahadith and the Quran with regards to birth and child rearing one will find a comfortable child spacing without having to go into drug taking, implant etc. being campaigned by the Planned Parenthood Federation. Indeed one would agree with Busari (1991:8) when he opined that the period between child bearing and the rearing to the conception and the birth of another child is a child spacing system and planned parenthood in practice. As he argued, Islam has appreciated and achieved family planning par excellence.

Even when Maudidi (1963:8) and Aliyu (1992:12) openly challenged the concept of child spacing one would suggest that they had in mind the western concept and technique of family planning. For the Muslim concept of child spacing the relevant ahadith and verses of the Quran are there as guide to us and which no scholar can challenge.

2.2 Child Spacing Techniques

In essence, therefore, Islam does not forbid child spacing. It is already part and parcel of the Muslim family lives as highlighted in the various provisions of ahadith and Quran.

What Islam is at logger head with is with regards to the reasons and techniques of child spacing. With regard to this al-Zawari in Olivia (1973:9) says birth control practice for no health reasons or for the sake of preserving the beauty of the figure or a means of

escaping the responsibility of bringing up children is unanimously judged to be forbidden in Islam. For this worldly reasons child spacing in the western context should not be practiced. We must appreciate Allah's blessings as He directed us in (Quran 16:72) *"And Allah has made for you males (and companions) of your own nature, And made for you out of them sons and daughters and children. And provided for you sustenance of the best, will they then believe in vain things and be ungrateful for Allah's favours"*.

Therefore child spacing/birth control based on poverty and maintaining beauty is not accepted by Islam because we are expected to marry and multiply in numbers so that the Muslim Ummah will prosper. Child spacing on health grounds can find accommodation in the various shari'ah provision cited above. Certainly the modern/western child spacing devices one would agree with Maudidi (1963:82) that they openly challenge Allah's scheme in the marital relationship of man and woman. The objectives of which matrimonial relationships should be based are specified by the holy Quran. The objectives include procreation, fostering of love and affection and promoting culture and civilization. To this, Allah says:

"Four wives are tilth to you, so go into your tilth as you like and do good before hand for yourselves". (Quran 2:223)

Also another verse says:

"And one of His sign is that He created mates for you from yourselves that you may find consolation in them and He ordained between you, love and compassion". (Quran 30:21)

3. Conclusion

The Almighty Allah has made many arrangement and schemes to enable the universe operate to its utmost peak among which are nourishment of all organic beings and the procreation of the species of human, animals and vegetation. Child spacing from its western philosophy consisting of its objectives, reasons and techniques can be argued to be diametrically opposed to Allah's scheme of procreation and creating doubts on Allah's ability to provide nourishment to all organic beings.

Indeed those who stay or kill their pregnancies for vain fear of poverty are the misguided ones whose actions will lead them astray. Allah says:

"Lost are those who slay their children from folly, without knowledge and forbid food which Allah hath provided for them inventing (lies) against Allah they

have indeed gone astray and needed no guidance". (Quran 6:140)

Islam strongly commands us to submit and pay homage to the two fundamental principles of shari'ah; the Quran and Sunnah. This is why for a Muslim interested in child spacing there is adequate provision in the ahadith and Quran to guide him. Child spacing in Islam especially with regards to the reasons and techniques is at logger heads with the western method of child spacing under the aegis of Planned Parenthood Federation. While opposing the western child spacing Islam has made provision for child spacing for the guided Muslim to follow. Therefore while Islam is opposed to the western style child spacing and to my mind permitting it in the Islamic way as portrayed in the ahadith on 'azl' and the Quranic injunction on child rearing and weaning we must not forget the blessings to be derived by following the teachings of our noble prophet Muhammad as reported by Bukhari contained in Mahmood (2000:10) where the prophet said: *"Marry a woman who shows love and affection and bear progenies constantly, indeed I shall be proud of your number (population) to other prophets on the Day of Judgment"*.

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