Bringing Family Planning to Iran

In 1958, under my direction, the Tehran School of Social Work began training the first professional social workers in Iran. The concept was so new that we had to coin a new word in Persian, *madadcar*, to describe them.

At the time, Iran was basically feudal. Over 70 percent of its 20 million people lived in rural areas. Eighty-five percent of men and 90 percent of women were nonliterate and living standards were very low. Girls could be married as soon as they turned nine and often were, especially in rural areas, where unmarried girls were considered a burden on the family. In 1956, 47 percent of women aged 15–19 were married. Iran’s population explosion was underway. The first official census conducted in 1956 showed a population of 18.9 million, of which more than 42 percent were under 15. Iran had one of the highest birthrates in the world, and population growth was over 3 percent.

Land reform, intended to jump-start economic development, instead uprooted rural communities. Nonliterate, unskilled peasants fled to the cities in search of work and a better life, but what they often found was hunger and all the miseries of urban poverty. In many ways, the capital, Tehran, suffered most from these upheavals.
The School of Social Work sent its first class to the slum areas in the United States. Fortunately, about this time we learned of Dr. Clarence Gamble and the Pathfinder Fund, which was already active in Asia, Africa, and some of our neighboring countries. We wrote to Dr. Gamble, who were pleasantly surprised to receive a kind and polite reply. A few weeks later, in early 1959, Pathfinder’s Faith Gates arrived in Tehran. She told us she was aware of our need and would be happy to help. We organized discussion groups with our social workers and sent to the elam areas so that Mrs. Gates could see exactly what we were talking about. In her re- en- ualplao of Pathfinder’s family planning work in Asia and Africa.

We were not sure if family planning would work in Iran, a Muslim country with traditional and cultural beliefs that children were gifts of God. The proof we heard daily was, “The one who gives birth gives bread.” Poor families needed more on the land and to support parents in old age. Children were called “the canes of old age” and were indispensable. Poor families needed sons to help on the land and to receive a kind and polite reply. A few weeks later, in early 1959, Pathfinder’s Faith Gates arrived in Tehran. She told us she was aware of our need and would be happy to help. We organized discussion groups with our social workers and sent to the slum areas so that Mrs. Gates could see exactly what we were talking about. In her presentation about Pathfinder’s family planning work in Asia and Africa.

In the early years, family planning was virtually unheard of in our country. I knew nothing about it. Contraception was never mentioned in our social work training in the United States. Fortunately, about this time we learned of Dr. Clarence Gamble and the Pathfinder Fund, which was already active in Asia, Africa, and some of our neighboring countries. We wrote to Dr. Gamble, and he was pleasantly surprised to receive a kind and polite reply. A few weeks later, in early 1959, Pathfinder’s Faith Gates arrived in Tehran. She told us she was aware of our needs and would be happy to help. We organized discussion groups with our social workers and sent to the elam areas so that Mrs. Gates could see exactly what we were talking about. In her presentation about Pathfinder’s family planning work in Asia and Africa.

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The early years of family planning were very difficult. In our strongly traditional culture, the number of children a woman had determined her social status. Every year, the maternity hospital in Tehran gave a “Woman of the Year” award to the woman who had the most children. But things were changing. Mrs. Tarbit and I attended one of these ceremonies, where the shah and shahbanu presented a woman who had won the gold medal with 17 children. After receiving her prize, she fell to her knees and said to the shah, “I have a request.” She requested that something be done so that the shah would prevent this. The shah took action and set up vocational training for mothers so they could earn money.

In 1960 the oral contraceptive was introduced to the Western world. In my social work training in the United States, I knew nothing about it. Contraception was never mentioned in our social work training in the United States. Fortunately, about this time we learned of Dr. Clarence Gamble and the Pathfinder Fund, which was already active in Asia, Africa, and some of our neighboring countries. We wrote to Dr. Gamble, and he was pleasantly surprised to receive a kind and polite reply. A few weeks later, in early 1959, Pathfinder’s Faith Gates arrived in Tehran. She told us she was aware of our needs and would be happy to help. We organized discussion groups with our social workers and sent to the slum areas so that Mrs. Gates could see exactly what we were talking about. In her presentation about Pathfinder’s family planning work in Asia and Africa.

A practical problem at the beginning was the shortage of trained midwives, nurses, health workers, and paramedical personnel who could take on this work. Hygiene was another problem—poor women were shy, ashamed, or embarrassed to go to the hospital. We had to train all social workers, midwives, gynecologists, and family planning staff from scratch. We even had to invite a foreigner to do it, as no Persian would accept the responsibility. We invited Dr. Kushnet, a gynecologist from the United States who had experience teaching in developing countries. He trained our staff on how to use technical sexual vocabulary to educate people.

While we social workers were trying to encourage people to space their children and avoid pregnancies, tradition and religion told people to have many children. In rural and slum areas, mostly married, children as workers. At the same time we were promoting family planning, we had to help people find additional sources of income to offset the economic burden of the additional family members. We organized discussions to explain the social and economic implications of family size.
Women could easily walk to the centers to find family planning education and services, and most of them put their children in the daycare center or in the youth group. The mothers would attend literacy classes and participate in other social and income-generating activities.

This integration of family planning into community social services provided the FPA with a variety of opportunities for direct and indirect contact with the mothers and young adults using the center and its services. The FPA motivator would visit families door-to-door to provide education and motivation in health and nutrition.

The social workers of the centers worked closely with the family planning team to create educational programs for mothers, fathers, and young people. These units were open into the evening in order to be available to working people.

**Social Welfare and Family Planning**

In 1967, the government established the position of undersecretary for family planning, with the goal of reducing the annual population growth rate from 1 percent to 2 percent, and achieved this by providing, for the first time, family planning services to women and men. These services included literacy classes, first-aid courses, on-the-job training courses, and social education training.

A very important step in this web of interactions was introducing educational programs, group meetings, and other methods that helped to provide education and motivation in health and nutrition. The social workers of the centers worked closely with the family planning team to create educational programs for mothers, fathers, and young people.

Since that time, supportive laws, all of which have been influenced by the ideas of social welfare, have raised the legal age of marriage and contributed to the physical and psychological development of children and children’s education. Educational programs, group meetings, and other methods have stressed men’s roles as parents and family members and contributed to the involvement of men in family planning programs. Welfare programs for workers have included literacy campaigns, classes, and social and income-generating activities.

A strong and close relationship between high literacy and family planning has been studied in several countries. Literacy classes were given in both urban and rural locations in Iran, showing a close relationship between high literacy and family planning. Vocational training was offered so that women could attain new or expanded skills.

Since its beginning in the Tehran School of Social Work, family planning in Iran has been understood to be an integral aspect of social welfare—ultimately leading to better nutrition, better health, better educational programs, better housing, and more employment. In an ancient civilization, it is part of the fabric of a modern society.

**Sattareh Farman Farmaian**

From 1958 to 1967, Sattareh Farman Farmaian was a United Nations expert to the Middle East, stationed in Baghdad, Iraq. In 1968, she founded the Tehran School of Social Work and served as its director until 1975. She also founded and was executive director of both the Community Welfare Centers and the Family Planning Association of Iran. During that same period, she served on the Faculty of Social Sciences and Research at Tehran University.

Throughout her career, Ms. Farman Farmaian has worked to advance the rights of women. She served as a member of the board of the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), and its task force on the “Forward Look” study, and on the special IPPF mission to China. She was also advisor to the United Nations advisory group on integration, social work, education, and family planning in developing countries. She was a board member of the International Association of Schools of Social Work and served as an advisor to the South Korean government on the media’s role in population and social development.

Ms. Farman Farmaian was a delegate to the Bucharest Population Conference (1974), the Tehran International Human Rights Conference (1975), and the Mexico International Conference for Women’s Year (1976).