

# Uncomfortable Truths

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The Nation

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The Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (Pemra) recently banned an advertisement by a contraceptive brand, calling it “immoral” and contrary to religious norms. After receiving a deluge of complaints from the public, the advertisement was considered an affront to Pakistani culture. Featuring a large man approaching a roadside stall to ask for a small pack of contraceptives, followed by a second man, who grins widely as he requests a larger pack, in the end wrapped with the entire street breaking out in a song and “bhangra” to celebrate.

We are fine seeing scenes of death and disaster, colourful dances and dramatic cases of violence in TV dramas, but a humorous ad promoting contraception is considered vulgar. We need to talk about why it is so. Why do we cringe at the mere implication of sex even in the legitimate arena of marriage? In Pakistan contraception is portrayed as being only for family planning and women's health. There could be no other use for it. The fact of the matter is, that the idea of sex itself is taboo, even when an advert addresses it in the confines of a marriage without any mention of the word.

One can understand the immediate need ban the advertisement. It is too private a matter to be made into a humorous spectacle. But what is the solution? According to the United Nations, a third of Pakistanis have no access to birth control even though its population is growing by more than two per cent a year. This is alarming. If we continue to grow like this, we are heading towards a collapse- famine, starvation, war. To impose a particular definition of modesty based on a few complaints, on approximately 180 million people who could definitely make use of any information with regards to family planning, is really not the best way to tackle a growing, worrisome problem.

The only other advertisements that we have in Pakistan are about family planning. The banned ad shows their use for a playful nature. Josh contraceptives are marketed in Pakistan by DKT International, a US-based non-profit organisation that works to promote family planning and HIV/AIDS prevention in the developing world. Maybe for them, this advertisement was a way to make the conversation about contraceptives less awkward, especially for men. Up until now, any marketing we have seen has been as a public service message for family planning and women's health. This has put the onus of protection on the woman, who actually have no access to contraception unless visited by a health worker. The advert addressed the male side of the issue, and we know that most of the male population is not that concerned with the problem of female health and spread of disease.

Adding the kind of culture that is already become an immense part of our songs, TV shows and soap operas, was it really in such bad taste? And if it was, do things that are not "tasteful" deserve an outright ban?