



# Policy Brief

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## The Other Half of the Equation: Involving Men in Family Planning

**D**espite efforts by the Kenyan Government to ensure a modest population growth rate that matches socio-economic growth, fertility remains high, especially at regional level and in rural areas. Among the reasons being highlighted are unfavourable cultural attitudes within communities across the country, endemic poverty, and lack of or poor involvement of men in family planning and reproductive health programmes.

For Kenya to complete its demographic transition, men must be encouraged to support family planning use by their spouses and partners. This calls for working with men to inculcate values that promote women's wellbeing, such as eradicating female genital cutting; promoting single-spouse marriages (monogamy) and discouraging polygamous marriages that could promote HIV infection; advocating for girls' education and also encouraging boys' education at the same time.

This policy brief informs family planning advocates, the public and the private sector of the

need to focus attention on men – the forgotten half of our society – to hasten the repositioning of the family planning programme.



### Should Men Care about Family Planning?

**M**en in most cases are heads of households, the decision makers whose judgements affect the health, wellbeing and economic livelihood of their families and communities. Men in most communities are custodians of cultural values, including many that are retrogressive and affect the quality of life of the family.

One such value involves family planning practice. While family planning has long been regarded as strictly a "women's issue", the fact is that wives must generally consider the wishes of their husbands in this matter, and often must get their permission to use any method at all. Thus the care about family planning by men at all times is key in improving the use of family planning services at all levels.

At a personal level, getting men involved in family planning will contribute to better health for their wives and children and a reduced economic burden on the men themselves. Beyond the immediate family, the involvement of men will help reduce maternal and child deaths associated with giving birth to too many children, help curtail HIV transmission and lower household poverty. There are many other reasons why men should care about family planning, and what they – and the country – could achieve if they took action.

### Family Planning Saves Lives

Although pregnancy and childbirth are natural phenomena, many pregnancies pose serious health risks for the mothers and their infants, specifically pregnancies characterized as:



**Proud couple with their twins**

- ♦ **Too early** – Girls under 18 face a higher than normal risk of death or disability from pregnancy, and their babies have more health risks.
- ♦ **Too many** – Women who have many births are more likely to have problems with their later pregnancies, and they face increased risk of death or disability, as do their newborns.
- ♦ **Too late** – Mothers over the age of 35 have a higher risk of death or disability associated with pregnancy, and their babies have more problems.
- ♦ **Too soon** – Children spaced too closely have a higher risk of illness and death. Women should wait at least two years after giving birth before trying to become pregnant again. This birth interval increases infant and child survival and protects the health of the mother.

Family planning can help infants and women avoid these risks.

### **Family Planning Improves Children's Nutrition, Health and Education**

Closely spaced, frequent births are linked to poverty and overburdened families. This often contributes to poor school performance owing to the children's poor nutrition, contagious childhood diseases and poor parental ability to provide individual attention to each child's needs. Large, poor families often cannot afford

**Healthy children learn more effectively, thus make the most of educational opportunities.**

schooling – and sometimes even food and health care – for all the children. Increasing birth spacing and having smaller families will help men achieve their family's health, economic and educational goals.

### **Family Planning Is Safe**

Contraception is one of the most researched medical interventions in history. While certain methods may not be safe for all potential users, they are safe for the vast majority and there are alternative methods that can be used. The World Health Organization issues guidelines on the safe use of contraceptives.

### **Women in Africa Want to Regulate Their Fertility**

In 21 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, one-fifth or more of married women say they have an unmet need for family planning services. That is, they would prefer to avoid or defer a pregnancy but are not using contraception.

### **Family Planning Reduces Abortions**

Family planning reduces the number of unintended pregnancies that may lead to abortion. Unsafe abortion accounts for an estimated 13% of all maternal deaths globally, and African women have the highest risk of abortion-related death in the world. By promoting family planning, men will help to save women's lives.

### **Family Planning Helps Prevent HIV/AIDS**

Integrating family planning into HIV/AIDS services will result in fewer HIV-positive babies and children orphaned by AIDS. In addition, one family planning method – the condom – provides dual protection against both unintended pregnancies and transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

### **Family Planning Reduces Teen Pregnancies**

Adolescent pregnancy is a serious problem that increases the risk of death both for the young mothers and for their newborns. Fistula resulting from prolonged labour is

more common in young mothers. Moreover, children born to unmarried adolescent mothers generally fare less well than children born into households with adult parents. Adolescent pregnancies also cut short young women's education, closing off future opportunities. In addition, when teenagers have sex without a condom, they increase their risk of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. By advocating for comprehensive sexuality education – including messages supporting abstinence and condom use – as well as family planning services and supplies for adolescents who need them – men can promote the health and wellbeing of young people.

**Men's support for improved family planning access for the poorest, most marginalized groups can contribute to the attainment of equity in health and other social and economic benefits among all family members.**

### **Family Planning Empowers Women**

Cultural and social norms may limit women's decision making ability in relationships and in the home, contributing to women's lower status. As a result, many women have limited control over their sexual lives and end up with high numbers of unintended pregnancies and births. Early childbirth often results in girls dropping out of school, seriously limiting their future options. As the main caregivers, women with large numbers of children are less able to participate in community activities or contribute to the community's economic growth.

Men may fear an "empowered woman", but generally such a woman becomes a more effective partner and both are better off. By embracing efforts to make family planning education and services available to all women of childbearing age, men will contribute significantly to raising the status of women, fostering an upward spiral for the women and their households and communities.

## Family Planning Contributes to the Overall Health, Economic Growth and Social Development of the Nation

High fertility in poor families disadvantages individual children, thus affecting personal and national educational attainment because many families cannot afford to send their children to school. Consequently, the nation suffers a loss of human potential. Having fewer but healthier children can reduce the economic burden on poor families, allowing them to invest more in each child's care and schooling, and thus help break the cycle of poverty for themselves and the nation.

## Family Planning Promotes Equity in the Community

Research shows that the poorest populations, refugees in camps, internally displaced people, persons with disabilities and women who require post-abortion care often do not have access to or are not encouraged to take advantage of family planning services. Men's support for improved family planning access for these groups can contribute to attainment of equity in health and other social and economic benefits among all family members.

## Family Planning Helps Preserve the Environment

As towns and cities expand and the search for fuel wood increases, deforestation and pollution threaten both human and ecological health. There is ever-growing need for clean water, better sanitation and more housing, as well as land for the production of food crops. By



Boys need to be taught early in life the importance of the father's role in family wellbeing.



This couple is counselled on child care before they take their baby home from the hospital. That the father is involved is a sign of changing times for both men and health care workers.

Men have always been involved in reproduction. Isn't it past time they were involved in reproductive health?

reducing fertility, family planning slows population growth and the environmental pressures associated with it and helps contribute to more sustainable use of natural resources.

## Benefits of Involving Men

In the gender and development literature, men appear very little, often as hazy background figures. "Good girl/bad boy" stereotypes present women as resourceful caring mothers, with men as relatively autonomous individualists, putting their own desires for drink or cigarettes before the family's needs. We need to change our views of men:

- ◆ From obstacles to partners.
- ◆ From the means to an end, to subjects with their own needs.
- ◆ From careless to potential for caring.
- ◆ From men as individualists to men as complex subjects.

Thus it is important to recognize that simple power analysis is not sufficient to explain the workings of intimate relationships, and that fathers have important roles in child development and

maternal and child health. An emphasis on male involvement will help to tap the self-interest of men in being involved fathers.

## Challenges to Overcome

But Kenya as a society is not there yet, and there are many challenges to this approach that will require rethinking programmatic objectives and activities. Among the challenges are the:

- ◆ Lack of sustained demand creation for family planning services, especially for men.
- ◆ Low community and private sector participation in family planning service provision for both men and women.
- ◆ Low level of integration of family planning with HIV/AIDS services and services targeted specifically at men.
- ◆ Strong socio cultural practices that result in wide regional disparities in fertility preferences and family planning use.
- ◆ Stereotypes about the involvement of men in family planning services.

## Programme Implications

- ◆ There is need to improve responsiveness to client needs by providing integrated family



planning, reproductive health, and HIV and AIDS services so as to reduce the time taken to access various services.

- ◆ Programmes should strive to reduce unmet need in family planning among married couples through the provision of a method mix that gives a wide choice and is cost-effective.
- ◆ Increased involvement of men in family planning and reproductive health, including wider availability and use of male methods, can be promoted by establishing male-only clinics in regions with low contraceptive use.
- ◆ There is need to ensure contraceptive commodity security so as to encourage unlimited availability and access to contraception by both men and women.
- ◆ Special efforts should be made to emphasize men's shared responsibility and promote their active involvement in responsible parenthood. This involves a wide range of issues, from sexual and reproductive behaviour, family planning, maternal and child health, and prevention of STIs including HIV, to control and contribution to family income and wellbeing, children's education, health and nutrition,



Fathers are more important to their daughters' development than many men would suppose. A good father-daughter relationship instils self-confidence in the girl.

and the recognition of the equal value of children of both sexes.

- ◆ Male responsibilities in family life must be included in the education of children from the earliest ages. Special emphasis should be given to the prevention of violence against women and children.

## Policy Action

Since the landmark International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in 1994, the concept of reproductive health has embraced both men and women in their search for optimum family size. This, combined with the results of the most recent Kenya Demographic and Health Survey (KDHS), calls for reassessment and finally repositioning of the family planning programme implementation mechanism (NCPD, 2004; NCAPD, 2007).

It has been discovered that since the family planning programme started in Kenya back in 1967, there have been no specific activities in the programme that are male specific. Until very recently, condom use, for example, has not been targeting married couples with a view to assisting them to avert pregnancy, but to help in avoiding contracting STDs and HIV/AIDS. Diversification in method mix needs to be promoted with male participation encouraged. Among other things it is important to:

- ◆ Undertake research on how boys and girls are socialized into a gender segregated and unequal world, with the idea that understanding and questioning this socialization will make an

important contribution to programmes that address the underlying factors.

- ◆ Develop theoretically and empirically grounded approaches to engage boys in promoting gender equity through programmes such as soccer projects, focusing on the role of male adolescents and youths.
- ◆ Recognize the need to work on the demand side by taking programmes to men – with full awareness that the socially constructed nature of gender means changing social norms.

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NCAPD is a semi-autonomous government agency that formulates and promotes population policy and coordinates related activities for sustainable development in Kenya.