



The Contraception Conundrum: Not Just a Women's Issue

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Aminah¹ is a 16-year old girl, living with her husband and new baby while struggling to finish secondary school in rural South Sudan. “When girls are married, they have to have lots of children. I do not want to have another child before I finish school; having one is hard enough. Though we have a small health clinic in the village I cannot go there to ask about family planning because everyone knows me and it would bring shame to my family.”

For Aminah, inability to access birth control means future unplanned pregnancies and continued interruptions in her life goals. Even worse? 215 million women around the world share Aminah's uncertain fate. According to Marie Stopes International (MSI), the leading NGO in international reproductive healthcare, “This unmet need is mostly due to a lack of access to services, in particular to long-acting and permanent [contraception] methods as well as a lack of demand.” While the primary obstacle may seem like infrastructure and geographic inaccessibility, Aminah's story hints at the deeper ideological issues that must also be overcome.

“The typical local woman has to contend with lack of modern family planning information, and where this barrier is reduced by some intervention, she has the hydra headed challenge of traditional and cultural myths and misconceptions that further restricts access to family planning methods of her choice” says Sarafina Ojimiduka, a Community Access Associate with Ipas Nigeria, a reproductive rights global nonprofit.

These prevailing traditional attitudes and behaviours are strongly influenced by societal expectations of masculinity. In cultures where patriarchy is accepted as the proper family structure, men perceive family planning and reproductive health as strictly a woman's responsibility. According to the United National Population Fund (UNFP) “the assumption that contraception, pregnancy, childbirth and prevention of sexually transmitted diseases are exclusively women's concerns reinforces men's lack of involvement in safeguarding reproductive health.”

Aminah elaborates “I have no way to access birth control and even if I could, I could never tell my husband about it. My role as wife and mother come first.”

How then do we overcome this unmentionable topic? One technique has been various awareness and advocacy methods. The United Nations, national governments and various grassroots and international NGOs all partake in advocacy

¹ Name has been changed

and family planning campaigns designed to sensitize local populations. MSI, for example, appoints health workers from within the communities they serve. As a result, community health workers already possess strong local networks and knowledge of local societal customs. Their acceptance within the community also ensures ownership of the health programmes and makes them ideally suited to respond to cultural misgivings about family planning.

Population Matters has also found that unless a woman personally opposes contraception, resistance to family planning appears to be less hostile where programmes are active and operational. Across the globe and in different cultures, family planning programmes have demonstrated an ability to succeed in seemingly unfavorable social and cultural environments.

As we learn from Aminah however, more is yet to be done.

It is safe to say that the reproductive rights debate involves a complex array of factors. From lack of access and demand, to the continued need for donor dollars, there are a number of challenges faced by family planning advocates. However, it is clear that traditional patriarchal ideology remains a steadfast foe in the face of family planning advancements. As facilities expand and mobile outreach units access more remote communities, research suggests that cultural barriers will continue to cede to family planning. Simultaneously, there are unprecedented efforts underway to reduce poverty and bring education and prosperity to developing countries around the world.

But are we doing enough to change cultural perceptions of family planning? Is it even the place of international NGOs to transform cultural beliefs? Given the enormous benefits that result from increased access to family planning, it is difficult to dispute that family planning is a worthy investment.

These benefits include the prevention of 53 million unintended pregnancies each year, resulting in 14.5 million fewer abortions and 250,000 fewer women dying in pregnancy or childbirth annually. Women with access to family planning can also provide better food, education and housing for their existing children. Additionally, they will be better situated to pursue education and work opportunities, thereby enhancing developing economies.

Aminah has the foresight to recognize the value of an education and family planning, but it remains to be seen however, if societal norms will shift enough to realize this young woman's ambitions.

"Here in our country girls are to be married before they complete their education. I just want to graduate – I value this so much."

About the author

Michelle Risinger is a gender specialist with 8 years of experience in humanitarian assistance, advocacy and evaluation. While living in Iraq and Afghanistan with the American Red Cross, Risinger designed and implemented health and education programs for women and youth. Additionally while with the Red Cross, Risinger was responsible for the logistics and distribution of humanitarian supplies across the Middle East and South Central Asia. Risinger undertook monitoring and evaluation in Bosnia & Herzegovina to ascertain disparities between local and INGO perceptions on women's human rights and implementation of UN treaties such as the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Risinger has consulted with Channel Research to design gender M&E methodologies and insure gender awareness was incorporated as a crosscutting theme throughout the proposals. Most recently, Risinger has been working with the Buguruni Youth Center in Dar es Salaam, which targets disaffected youths, to create a number of vocational, micro-credit and women's empowerment programs.