

A Gender-Based Approach to Birth Spacing in India

Millions of Indian women are at risk of an unwanted pregnancy; 70% of the women who want to space their next birth are using no family planning. Yet birth spacing methods are not widely promoted or used in India. A higher percentage of women in India use traditional methods such as the “safe period”, than any other single birth spacing method, yet very few can correctly identify their fertile period. Men, a critical half of the family planning equation, are rarely involved in family planning services. A household survey of 1,793 currently married women aged 15-49 years and 1,058 men (husbands of these women) was conducted in the Ranchi District of Jharkhand, a primarily rural state. Analysis of survey results suggests that including men in family planning interventions could be an effective strategy to increase the use of effective birth spacing methods.

Survey data show high unmet need for family planning in Jharkhand; 28% of current pregnancies were mistimed and 9% were unwanted. Current family planning use was 62%, with female sterilization dominating the method mix (38%). Among birth spacing methods, however, use of traditional methods which involve men was higher than use of other methods; 14% of women reported using a traditional method and about 4% reported pill use. Among men, 30% reported use of condoms, 33% use of periodic abstinence and 19% withdrawal. In addition to heavy reliance on ineffective methods, many couples who wish to avoid pregnancy are not using any method. Men and women cite similar reasons for non-use of family planning, including health concerns (19%), religion (11%), lack of knowledge/access (6%) and husband opposition (5%).

Virtually all men and women were aware of female sterilization and about 80% of men and women knew of oral contraceptives. However, men were more aware of other spacing methods than were women. Interestingly, knowledge of a fertility-awareness based method was higher among men than women (75% vs. 55%). However, only 15% of respondents could correctly identify the fertile period. Although about seventy percent of men and women could identify a source for obtaining a family planning method, only two percent of women knew where to go for a natural method. A somewhat higher percentage of men could identify a source of information on natural methods (8%), most citing sources outside of the formal health sector.

The Indian family planning program has focused its efforts on providing permanent methods to women. However, recent recognition of the benefits of birth spacing has resulted in a new interest in temporary methods. These results suggest that involving men in services and providing a modern, natural method could address both prevalent use of ineffective traditional methods and major reasons for nonuse of family planning. However, program managers are often reluctant to involve men in family planning, reasoning that men are difficult to reach and generally unsupportive. Many believe that men pose more of a problem than an opportunity, citing women's lack of sexual autonomy.

However, these findings suggest that most women and men feel that family planning decisions are made jointly and that addressing family planning as a couple, rather than a female, issue could resonate well. Nevertheless, concerns with women's lack of sexual autonomy must be taken into account. Study results reveal that women as well as men hold attitudes which restrict women's autonomy and interventions must work with both to change cultural norms. Interestingly, data shows that normatively, respondents afford women more autonomy in the sexual arena than in other aspects of life. For example, more respondents state that a man is justified in hitting his wife if he burns the food than if she refuses sex. Also, women are significantly more likely than men to agree with statements which endorse women's lack of power in the sexual relationship. When asked under what circumstances, if any, a husband is justified in hitting or beating his wife, a higher percentage of women than men report that husbands are justified in beating their wives for every circumstance mentioned. For example, twice as many women as men stated that a husband is justified in hitting his wife if she refuses sex. This pattern is also observed when respondents were asked under what circumstances a wife is justified in refusing sex with her husband. In this scenario, 90% of men compared to 70% of women say she is justified in refusing sex if she knows her husband has a sexually transmitted infection. This gender gap is most striking in the responses given by men and women to the question of what actions a husband has the right to take if his wife refuses sex. Almost one third of women state that husbands are justified in using force in this situation, as compared to only 5% of husbands.

Given the prevalent use of methods which rely on male involvement, such as periodic abstinence and withdrawal, testing strategies to include men in family planning services represent a promising strategy to improve birth spacing in India. Also, including a modern, effective natural family planning option, such as the Standard Days Method, would expand birth spacing options and could improve family planning use among couples reluctant to use existing methods. Innovations underway in the Jharkand public sector family planning services to address these issues will be presented.