

Introduction

Although male-female relationships are central to family planning use, programs rarely consider the needs of both men and women. Many family planning programs fail to take men into account, assuming that they are disinterested or uncooperative. Similarly, few programs address the context of family planning use – the sexual relationship. Introducing the Standard Days Method (SDM), a new fertility awareness-based method, however, necessarily involves addressing these issues.

The SDM, a new fertility awareness-based method, was developed through scientific analysis of the fertile time in the woman's menstrual cycle. It identifies the fertile window as days 8-19 of the cycle, for women with menstrual cycles usually between 26 and 32 days. Couples using the SDM to prevent pregnancy must avoid intercourse or use a barrier method during the fertile days. Many SDM users find that CycleBeads, a color-coded string of beads helps them to identify the fertile and infertile days of their cycles, and to monitor their cycle lengths.

Data from household surveys and interviews with male and female SDM users in two diverse settings - India and El Salvador, where the method had been recently introduced - provide insight into the interaction between gender, the sexual relationship, culture and the adoption, use and continuation of family planning. Method acceptability, an important determinant of successful family planning use, is explored from the perspective of men as well as women, with a focus on the influence of method use on intimate behavior.

Data and Methods

Operations research to test SDM introduction was conducted in rural communities in El Salvador, and in rural villages and urban slums in Northern India. All three studies tested strategies to involve men in family planning outreach and counseling. Baseline and end line household surveys were conducted to assess the diffusion of family planning information among men and women. Among the three projects, a total of 916 men and 908 women were interviewed at end line. In addition, interviews were conducted with 516 male and 541 female SDM users when they exited the study due to method discontinuation, pregnancy or completion of 13 cycles of SDM use. Focus groups and in-depth interviews were also held with male and female users to explore qualitative aspects of satisfaction, such as the influence of method use on the couple relationship.

Knowledge and Attitudes

Survey results document deficits in men's family planning knowledge, despite special efforts made by programs to reach men and gender-biases (particularly among women) related to family planning use. In urban slums in India, for example, survey results identified a gender gap in family planning knowledge and services. Men were much less likely than women to have heard of the SDM, or to have been offered family planning services – only 10% of men had heard of the SDM, in comparison with 37% of women. Similar discrepancies were true for other methods as well. Another concern was the fact that only 7% of men had been offered family planning services during the past year, in comparison with 34% of women. Further, even those 7% of men may not have received a service that met their needs. None reported that they were offered a male or couple method such as vasectomy, condoms or the SDM.

Both men and women held gender attitudes that inhibit family planning use. In fact, in some cases women's attitudes were more restrictive than those of men. In El Salvador, twice as many women than men (20% vs. 10%) believed that the more children a man has the more "macho" he is. Women were also more likely to believe that men should participate little in family planning.

Method Adoption

Interviews with male and female SDM users showed that perspectives on the SDM varied little by sex. Most men and women chose the SDM because it is affordable, has no side effects and does not affect women's health, although men also mentioned the importance of accurately identifying the fertile days. Results of in-depth interviews suggest that both the husband and the wife decide whether to use a method and which method to use. However, most of the time it is the woman who initiates use of the method and then convinces her husband. On the other hand, the husband almost always decides when to have sex.

Method Use

Although providers were initially concerned with the willingness and ability of men to use the SDM correctly, study results show that most of the men using the SDM were supportive and cooperative. Men were encouraged to participate in SDM use, and data suggest that they did so by abstaining or using condoms, following their wife's directions, asking what day of the cycle they were on, and marking the first day of menses on a calendar. Nonetheless, women were primarily responsible for method use. While men were aware of need to be careful during fertile days, only a few could actually identify their wife's fertile days - most men relied on their wives to tell them. When asked when during the menstrual cycle they should abstain or use a condom, male SDM users were much more likely to cite "between days 8 to 19" than female users, who tended to answer, "during the white bead days". This probably reflects the woman's direct role in tracking her

fertile days with CycleBeads. Another area where male and female responses differed had to do with the management of the fertile days; for example, more men than women in rural India reported use of abstinence (rather than condoms) (88% vs. 68%) during the fertile days.

When probed for problems using the SDM, less than 10% of men and women reported any difficulties identifying the woman's fertile days or avoiding unprotected sex during the fertile days. Men and women were remarkably consistent in their answers, with the exception that more women than men reported that it was harder for their partner than for themselves to use the SDM.

Method Acceptability

Contrary to expectations that men would find the SDM unacceptable, most users were highly satisfied with SDM, men only slightly less so than women. In El Salvador, for example, 90% of men would recommend the SDM, compared to 96% of women. This discrepancy was greater in India. In rural villages where no special efforts were made to inform men about the method, 96% of women vs. 47% of men would recommend the method to others. However, in villages where men were provided information, 98% of women and 87% of men would recommend the SDM.

The influence of family planning use on the couple relationship is an intrinsic attribute of contraceptive methods, with implications for method adoption, correct use and continuation. Most men and women reported that SDM use had no effect on their relationship. Almost all of those who did notice a change reported an improvement (95%); men reported fewer disagreements about the timing of sex, while women focused on increased partner communication. The remaining 5% mentioned anger or discomfort caused by the need to abstain or use a condom during the fertile days.

During in-depth interviews, some men and women reported that SDM use contributed to new ways of intimate and emotional bonding between the couple. This bonding ranged from playful sexual banter to increased touching and caressing, especially during white bead days. In general, SDM use increased the couple's sense of security and improved their sexual relationship, since they no longer feared pregnancy nor argued about the timing of sex. Some of the users who discontinued method use mentioned problems in abstaining and inability to follow the method due to lack of mutual trust.

Cultural Differences

The results of these studies suggest that in the area of method acceptability, cultural differences may be more influential than gender differences. In El Salvador, the need to adapt sexual behavior during the fertile days was viewed as a limitation of the method, although one that was often outweighed by its

advantages. In the Indian context, on the other hand, most men and women did not view abstinence as a major disadvantage of the method. Rather, they valued the discipline of abstaining as consistent with their religious and moral beliefs. Also, many couples in both settings valued highly the opportunity to have “skin on skin” sex without fear of pregnancy during most days of the month.

Conclusions

Study results suggest that men frequently lack family planning information; further, they lack access to a range of family planning options. These results highlight the role men play as family planning decision-makers and users, and contribute to an increasing recognition of the importance of identifying effective strategies to address the family planning gender gap. Introduction of the SDM represents one strategy to expand choices for men and couples. Study findings also point to the need to involve men in outreach and services, and the importance of considering the influence of method use on the couple and their relationship. Implications of the interface between sexual pleasure and contraceptive use for training, counseling and communication efforts will be discussed, as well as the need for specific messages for men and women tailored to their individual motivations and responsibilities in the family planning arena.