

FAITH LEADERS ADDRESS RISING YOUTH PREGNANCY RATES IN KENYA

CHALLENGE

County structures and competing priorities have hindered prioritization of family planning (FP) in Kenya. There is limited funding for advocacy activities to push for tangible outcomes such as favorable policies, a budget line for FP in county budgets and Costed Implementation Plans (CIP) for family planning. Family planning and reproductive health needs of adolescents and young people are largely forgotten.

STRATEGY: Why Engage Religious Leaders in Health Matters Like Pregnancy?

Involving religious leaders in health matters and cultural norms is important because they are engaged community members and understand their communities' culture, beliefs, and other factors that may influence health. Religious leaders are natural advocates for health matters, including family planning because they care about the well-being of their congregations, are well connected in their communities. They are also experienced public speakers with access to large numbers of people, including youth, through their houses of worship and group forums.

LOCATION & KEY ACTORS

The Christian Advocacy for Family Planning in Africa (CAFPA) project is active in Kiambu, Meru, and Murang'a Counties in Kenya, and is implemented by the Christian Health Association of Kenya (CHAK) in partnership with Christian Connections for International Health. This case study focuses on the advocacy work of religious leaders in Kiambu County.

ENGAGING COUNTY OFFICIALS TO ADDRESS PRIORITY AREAS

The religious leaders in Kiambu County have cultivated a working relationship with county health officials and prioritize open communication with the officials. The religious leaders held several meetings with the county health officials to identify areas that required intervention through Family Planning in 2019.

County health officials expressed their concern about the high incidence of teenage pregnancies in the county and sought to collaborate with the religious leaders to address this trend.

The religious leaders reached out to a larger group of faith leaders in Kiambu County to sensitize them on the situation and the need for intervention. The religious leader advocates invited their local counterparts to a meeting at the CHAK Guest House with county health officials held in September 2019. Over 40 religious leaders from Christian (both Protestant and Catholic traditions) as well as the Islamic faith attended the meeting and were sensitized by the county health officials on the issue of high rates of teenage pregnancy in the county in addition to overall health issues, like HIV, alcohol and drug abuse, and maternal and child mortality.

YOUTH FORUMS

Following the September 2019 meeting, the religious leaders continued their engagement with county health officials and their focus on adolescent pregnancy. The religious leaders realized that youth forums, held every year in November and December by the churches, would be an ideal opportunity to educate youth on the danger of early pregnancy.

The forums target both young men and women who are sensitized on issues such as reproductive health through a biblical approach as they move from childhood to adolescence and onto adulthood.

Speakers at these forums include the youth themselves, the religious leaders and county health officials.



AIC Kijabe Region senior youth camp in December 2019.
Photo courtesy of Reverend Geoffrey Njihia



My Question

In the duration between Sunday school and marriage, we as the clergy have not been able to follow up our youth closely. This is why we are talking about teen pregnancies. As clergy, we need to advocate for them to abstain. If they do not abstain, what are the other choices?

-Bishop Samuel Kairu, Family Planning Advocate
Pentecostal Evangelical Fellowship of Africa (PEFA) Church,
Kiambu County, Kenya

The youth forums were held in December 2019 during the school holidays to ensure as many youth as possible were able to attend. Kiambu County Health officials addressed the youth at the AIC Kijabe Region senior youth camp, where discussions centered on adolescent pregnancies and the challenges they bring, as well as mental health. The youth were also trained on building bridges with parents and siblings and how to have healthy relationships.

At the Pentecostal Evangelical Fellowship of Africa (PEFA) Church youth conference held at a local secondary school, the County Government health officials also spoke to the youth about mental health and adolescent pregnancies. They discussed using technology in positive ways to improve their lives and their communities.

OUTCOMES

Thanks to the work of religious leaders in the CAFPA project:

- 1800 youth attended the youth forums in December 2019 where they heard messages about family planning, as well as other health issues, healthy family relationships and positive use of technology.
- Collaboration between the Kiambu County Health Department, CHAK and the religious leaders is stronger.
- 40 additional religious leaders were sensitized on adolescent pregnancy and reproductive health and are in a better position to address these issues among their congregants.

LESSONS LEARNED

Religious leaders are a powerful voice for reaching youth with health messages. Support and funding for more comprehensive training for religious leaders to talk to youth about family planning could increase their impact.

Collaboration between the Church and County Governments which best understand the needs of the populations they serve is essential if we are to successfully address all health and family issues, including sexual and reproductive health, mental health and encouraging healthy family relationships.

NEXT STEPS

1. CHAK and the Kiambu County Government Health Team will pursue a CIP development process.
2. Religious leaders in the county will continue to collaborate with the government in addressing teenage pregnancies and the underlying sexual reproductive health issues through various meetings and forums as well as advocate for FP uptake.
3. Develop health messages for faith leaders to use in communicating with youth.



Pentecostal Evangelical Fellowship of Africa (PEFA) Church youth conference at Kairi High School in Kiambu County in December 2019.