

ENCOURAGING MALE INVOLVEMENT IN FAMILY PLANNING: ENGAGING MUSLIMS IN KILIFI COUNTY THROUGH FAITH LEADER ADVOCACY

CAFPA PROJECT

CHALLENGE

Family Planning (FP) has been defined as having children by choice not chance. It involves making a conscious decision on family size and spacing between children. Studies show that male involvement positively influences continued use of family planning methods.

In Kenya, family planning is frequently perceived as a woman's concern, and family planning programs most often target women. Yet men often have greater decision-making power over household matters, including health care due to gender dynamics.

WHY RELIGIOUS LEADERS ARE KEY TO FAMILY PLANNING ACCEPTANCE AND HIV PREVENTION

Religious leaders are influential advocates for health as they are well trusted in the communities they serve and they are able to reach families and individuals. Equipped with appropriate messages and skills, religious leaders will not only empower their communities and congregations – leading to increased uptake of health services, including family planning – but are also able to advocate with policy makers and influence key decisions.

The Christian Advocacy for Family Planning in Africa (CAFPA) project, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, engages religious leaders to advocate for community and policy maker support for family planning and HIV prevention to drive positive policy change.

LOCATION

The project is implemented in six counties in Kenya: Kiambu, Kilifi, Machakos, Meru, Murang'a and Narok.



Religious Leaders from Kilifi County, Ustadh Rashid Osman and Rev. Michael Shitandi, speaking to men at the Taqwa Islamic and Technical Centre, on how they can make reproductive health decisions, including family planning, together with their partners.

KEY PLAYERS

The Christian Health Association of Kenya (CHAK) worked with Christian Connections for International Health (CCIH) and Religious Leaders to engage national and county policy makers, health care workers and community social influencers.

STRATEGY

Religious leaders are well placed to change harmful perceptions and attitudes about family planning, HIV, and other health matters because they are respected opinion leaders and have a ready audience in their houses of worship. The different groupings into which congregations are naturally divided – such as youth,

women's and men's groups – provide opportunities to tailor family planning and HIV messages for identified target audiences. The CAFPA project capitalized on these factors and engaged religious leaders to advocate for increased uptake of family planning in their congregations, encourage healthy behavior to prevent HIV, and encourage male engagement, policy changes and budget allocation for FP and HIV prevention by the six counties in which the project was implemented.

TACTICS

Ustadh Rashid Osman, an Imam in Kilifi County, was one of the 54 faith leaders from six counties in Kenya trained in family planning, gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS advocacy through the CAFPA project. The training, held in February 2021, gave Ustadh Rashid additional motivation to continue addressing these issues in his community.



Kilifi County team of faith leaders working in the CAFPA project in an advocacy planning and experience sharing meeting with CHAK and CCIH staff in October 2021.

Of key concern to Ustadh Rashid was how to increase FP uptake in his community, having been identified as an FP champion by the National Council for Population and Development, a government body. Before the training, Ustadh Rashid had already begun speaking to his community on FP.

A key challenge for him, however, was getting men involved in FP and reproductive health decisions in their families. Whenever he called meetings to discuss FP and reproductive health only women showed up.

Ustadh Rashid began by speaking to men in the mosque where he served as Imam during Friday sermons and prayers. He told them that they were responsible for their households, according to Quranic teachings, and needed to get involved in decisions affecting their families. After prayers, he asked the men to stay and discuss HIV/AIDS and teenage pregnancies. In the beginning, few men stayed for the discussions, but as he gradually began to praise men who were engaged and shared photos of them taking positive steps – such as discussing FP at home in a WhatsApp group – more men became involved in the discussions. The men responded positively because these issues were affecting their households. In addition to family planning, Ustadh Rashid began talking about gender-based violence – another subject which is regarded as taboo in the community – with this larger group of men.

Ustadh Rashid works closely with health workers from local health facilities and other religious leaders in the CAFPA project to give the right information to his community. To reach even more mosque congregations in his area, Ustadh Rashid divided Imams under his charge in Rabai Sub-County into four wards. He reaches out to Imams in each ward with FP messages and tasks them with getting the messages out to the men in their congregations. Each ward has between nine and 13 Imams. Initially, the Imams were against FP and needed to be convinced that it was allowed in Islam. Ustadh Rashid

held meetings with the Imams and their congregations, so the community could participate freely in the discussions.

He has also used mainstream media, mainly radio, as well as social media to advocate for FP. He formed three WhatsApp groups, two targeting Imams and one targeting football coaches to advocate for FP and other health issues affecting his community. Through the WhatsApp platform, Ustadh Rashid is able to address the Imams' concerns on FP and answer any questions they may have. His social media posts are taken positively by the younger audiences who follow him, while FP concerns raised on these platforms are appropriately addressed.

OUTCOMES

Following the CAFPA training, Ustadh Rashid felt more empowered to speak about FP and reproductive health issues affecting his community. Additionally, by working closely with health workers from nearby local facilities, he has also been able to reach youth and women, in addition to the men. The Imams working under him in Rabai Sub-County have been empowered to speak out on FP and reproductive health issues in their communities, including encouraging male participation in discussing and finding solutions to the challenges facing their families.

During the men's meetings held after Friday prayers, the men agreed that FP was having the number of children one could comfortably bring up. Further, it was agreed that according to Quranic teachings, a woman needed two years to breastfeed a child, while couples were advised to take an additional year to attempt conception. This added up to child spacing of three years, removing the idea that FP was not accepted in Islam. The big question then became which FP methods were allowed in Islam, apart from breastfeeding. This opened the door for discussions and it was agreed that non-permanent methods were allowed and acceptable. This view is backed by Muslim scholars whose studies and writings Ustadh Rashid constantly refers to in his teachings, in addition to supporting Quran text.

Ustadh Rashid says that Muslims for Health Education (MIHE), a Community-Based Organisation (CBO), has been instrumental in bringing Muslim religious leaders together to discuss issues affecting their communities, including family planning. He has been invited to add the Muslim voice in several trainings and workshops.

Additionally, through radio stations that target the Muslim community in Kilifi County, including Radio Rahma, Msenangu FM and Boss Radio, Ustadh Rashid has been able to share FP messages and encourage men's participation.

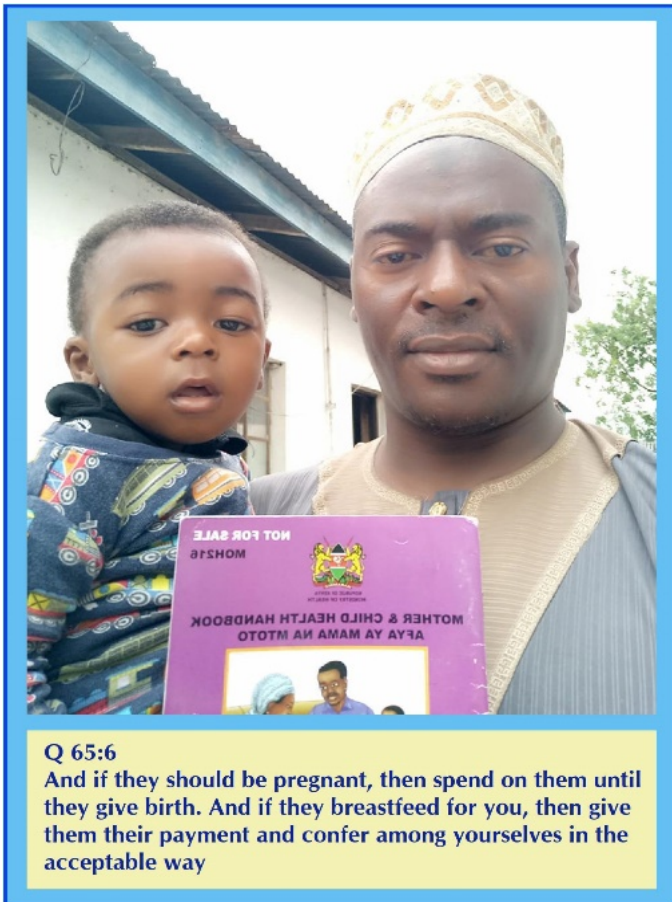
NEXT STEPS

Next steps may include:

1. Religious leaders from Kilifi County trained in the CAFPA project will continue to advocate for healthy families in their congregations using the knowledge gained during the training and implementation period that lasted one year.
2. Ustadh Rashid will continue with advocacy efforts through MIHE to encourage men's participation in reproductive health, including FP.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. Equipping religious leaders with the right messages makes them effective advocates for reproductive health, including FP, in their communities and congregations.
2. Faith leaders are able to reach men in their congregations through already established structures with messages on men's involvement in FP and reproductive health of their families.
3. It is important for congregations and communities to fully understand the meaning of FP and the methods available in order to increase uptake and ensure healthy families.



My story

“A man is responsible for his household. How do we fulfill our responsibilities as men? We need to get involved. The Quran supports family planning and healthy families. We also need to talk to our children about life and relationships to avoid early pregnancies.”

Ustadh Rashid Osman, Family Planning Advocate, Kilifi, Kenya



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