

**Original Article**

# INTER-SPOUSE COMMUNICATION AND ACCEPTANCE OF FAMILY PLANNING

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**Abstract**

**Context:** Inter-spouse communication majorly influences the decision making process of couples for adopting family planning measures. This factor is especially important in male dominated cultures, where, it is thought unnecessary for men to discuss family planning as child bearing and contraception are presumed to be female matters.

**Aims:** The present study was conducted with the aim to know the extent of inter spouse communication among couples and its impact on use of family planning measures and family size.

**Settings and Design:** The study was conducted among ever married women in the reproductive age group of 15-49 years (n=718) residing in Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, India. The study was a community based cross-sectional study.

**Methods and Material:** A community based household survey was conducted in the registered areas of urban and rural health training centres of Department of Community Medicine, Jawaharlal Nehru Medical College, Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh. Participants were enquired on various parameters related to their conversations on family planning with their husband, ever use of contraception and their family size.

**Statistical analysis used:** Chi square was applied to test the association.

**Results:** A sizeable portion (18.1%) of women had never conversed with their husbands on family planning matters. Communicators were observed to have lesser number of living children (p<0.001). Current use of contraceptives was significantly associated with inter spouse discussion (p<0.05). 43% women from the study sample had never discussed the choice of a contraceptive method with their husbands.

**Conclusions:** Husband-wife communication plays an important role in family planning acceptance as well as in deciding the final family size.

Key-words: Inter-spouse communication, family planning, ever married women

**Introduction:** Many studies have been conducted to find out the dynamics of family planning adoption but demographic research has mostly focused on the determinants of women’s contraceptive use. Studies pertaining to the husband’s influence in decision making regarding family size and family planning adoption are few and far between. Most developing nations of the world including India still have male dominated cultures. In such scenarios husband’s

approval is an important prerequisite for a woman to use family planning. From a family perspective, the first step in a rational process of fertility decision making involves communication between spouses<sup>1,2</sup>.

The background level of contraceptive prevalence rate in India according to National Family Health Survey-3, (2005-06)<sup>3</sup> is 56%. Uttar Pradesh<sup>3</sup> is one of the states of India where the rate of contraceptive use is even lower than 50%. Women have various barriers for acceptance of family planning. A number of factors influence contraceptive use such as woman’s age, her level of education, religious beliefs, place of residence-whether rural/urban, parity, socio economic class, number of living children, number of male children, availability and accessibility of services, cost of services, attitude of woman, husband, family members, side effects, failure of contraceptives and inter-spouse communication. Good communication between husband and wife influences the decision making process between couples for adoption of health practices. Inter-spouse communication about family planning influences their contraceptive choices and practices. Communication between couples is an ongoing process, what seems to be important is communication about family planning matters at the appropriate stage of their marriage and reproductive span. Deciding upon accepting contraception after having exceeded their desired number of children can be of limited value.

This study determines the extent of inter-spouse communication about family planning, desired family size and its impact on use of contraception and hence family size. Conducting such a study was important because there are very few studies in India which have tried to study the role of inter spouse communication and its impact on contraceptive use.

**Subjects and Methods:**

The present study was conducted in the field practice areas (Urban Health Training Centre and Rural Health Training Centre) of the Department of Community Medicine, Jawaharlal Nehru Medical College, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India. Aligarh is situated in western Uttar Pradesh, India. The distribution of sample from these areas is shown in Fig. 1.

**Figure 1: Sampling frame of the study population**

Total households covered: 396

Urban health training centre			Rural health training centre		
Regions	Households	Ever married women	Villages	Households	Ever married women
Firdaus Nagar	53	99	Jawan	93	167
Nagla qila	41	76	Sumera	78	140
Shahenshabad	18	34	Chola jawan	42	76
Patwari ka Nagla	07	12	Tejpur	25	44
			Gadia bhojpur	23	42
			Jawan sikanderpur	08	14
			Sumera jhaal	08	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>119</b>	<b>221</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>277</b>	<b>497</b>

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A community based cross-sectional study was carried out using systematic random sampling. The study sample was calculated using the couple protection rate of Uttar Pradesh as 38%. 718 ever married women between 15-49 years were interviewed during house to house visits. A study questionnaire was developed for studying various parameters related to contraceptive use including inter-spouse communication. The study was conducted over a period of one year from August 2007 to July 2008. Women who were resident in the place of study and were registered with the respective health training centres were included in the study. The study sample drawn from each area was according to probability proportional to size. Informed verbal consent was taken from each woman. Confidentiality was assured and the interview was conducted in a non-judgmental manner.

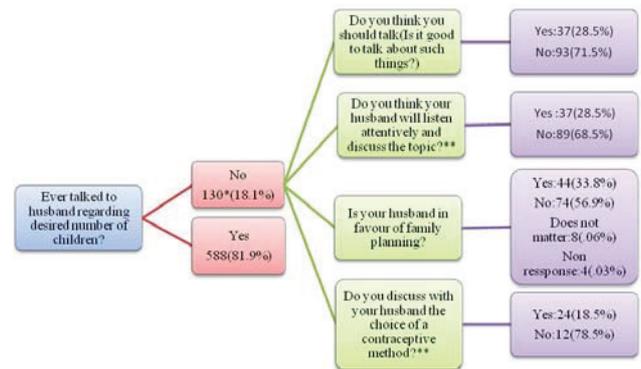
**Results:**

The socio-demographic profile of the study subjects is depicted in Table 1. Most women in the study sample were in the 20-29 year age group. Larger number of subjects were followers of Hindu faith, although a large proportion of sample population also consisted of Muslim women. Women from the General category were more represented in the sample. An important observation was that approximately 60% women had received no education; however the educational status of husbands was seen to be better. Majority of women were housewives and most of them belonged to the lower social class. An almost equal distribution was seen in relation to the type of families whether being joint or nuclear.

**Table 1: Distribution of married women (15-49 yrs) by selected background characteristics (N=718)**

Background characteristics	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
<b>1.1 Age group(in yrs)</b>		
15-19	43	6
20-29	343	47.8
30-39	218	30.4
40-49	114	15.9
<b>1.2 Religion</b>		
Hindu	411	57.2
Muslim	304	42.3
Christian	3	0.4
<b>1.3 Caste</b>		
General	326	45.4
Schedule Caste	150	20.9
Other backward class	242	33.7
<b>1.4 Education of woman</b>		
Illiterate	422	58.8
Primary	94	13.1
Secondary	164	22.8
Graduate and above	38	5.3
<b>1.5 Education of husband</b>		
Illiterate	174	24.2
Primary	105	14.6
Secondary & above	439	61.1
<b>1.6 Occupation of woman</b>		
Housewife	650	90.5
skilled worker	23	3.2
clerical/shop/farm	37	5.2
professional	8	1.1
<b>1.7 Social Class</b>		
High	1	.1
Middle	108	15.0
Low	609	84.8
<b>1.8 Type of family</b>		
Joint	360	50.1
Nuclear	358	49.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>718</b>	<b>100.0</b>

As depicted in the flow chart showing Inter-spouse communication we can assess the thought process of couples not using contraception. As shown in the flowchart (Figure 2), 81.9% women had talked to their husbands regarding the number of children they would like to have, 18.1% had never talked to their husbands about the number of children they should have, or would like to have. Among women who had never talked to their husbands about the desired number of children 71.5% thought that it was unnecessary to talk about such matters, 68.5% women felt that their husbands would be uninterested to talk about this issue, although 33.8% women felt that their husbands were in favour of family planning and only 18.5% women had discussed the choice of family planning methods with their husbands. Among the total sample 43% had never discussed the choice of a contraceptive method with their husbands.



\*Including widows and women separated from their husbands  
 \*\*Excluding widows

**Figure 2: Flowchart showing responses of women regarding various aspects of inter-spouse communication**

Inter-spouse communication can also be seen to positively influence contraceptive practice. More women had ever used contraception in their lives if they had communicated with their husbands about their desired family size as shown in Table 1. Discussion among spouses helps them to decide whether they need contraceptive methods and at which stages of their reproductive period. Women are unlikely to adopt family planning methods if they do not have the support and co-operation from their partners. The relationship was found to be significantly associated.

**Table 1: Relation between inter-spouse communication and ever use of contraception by women**

Discussed desired family size with husband	Ever used contraception		Total
	No	Yes	
no	78	52	130
yes	210	378	588
<b>Total</b>	<b>288</b>	<b>430</b>	<b>718</b>

$\chi^2=26.14, df =1, p<0.001$

Inter-spouse communication has its impact on contraceptive use which finally affects family size. The relation can be seen in Table 2, where, women who were communicating with their husbands about their desired family size were seen to have a smaller family size. Communication among couples helps them decide their desired number of children and about contraceptive use to achieve the desired size. A

significant association was seen to exist between communication between husband and wife and number of children women had. Poor communicators have greater chances of having a larger family size.

**Table 2: Relation between inter-spouse communication and number of children**

Ever talked to husband regarding desired number of children	Number of children										Total	
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9		10
No	13	14	9	15	24	23	20	7	3	2	0	130
Yes	42	89	120	120	101	73	31	8	3	0	1	588
<b>Total</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>135</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>718</b>

$\chi^2=57.061, df=10, p<0.001$

**Discussion:** This study emphasises the role husband-wife communication plays in acceptance of family planning and limiting the family size. It was seen that a substantial number of women (18.1%) had not communicated at all with their spouses about their desired family size. A study done by Dabral and Malik<sup>4</sup> also found that more than half of the women reported that they have not discussed about family planning methods with their husbands reflecting lack of spousal communication regarding family planning<sup>3</sup>. In his user-non user study in Dacca, East Pakistan, Green<sup>5</sup> observed that inter-spouse communication was an important process by which couples reached agreement on each other's hopes regarding child spacing and family size. Bogue<sup>6</sup> observed that effective inter-spouse communication on matters related to family planning is very crucial for the success of family planning programmes. Chandrasekhar<sup>7</sup> also drew his conclusion on the same lines. Mitchell<sup>8</sup> in his study of husband-wife relationship and family planning in urban Hong Kong noted that many women who were favourably inclined to practice family planning did not practice it because of not receiving enough encouragement from their spouses. He observed that their husbands might have had favourable attitudes towards family planning but this had never been communicated to the wives. A large number of unwanted pregnancies were partially the outcome of the inability of family members or family groups to make decisions. The study of Ramakumar and Gopal<sup>9</sup> revealed that along the socioeconomic scale, couples in a higher position communicated more with each other than others. They concluded with the hope that it should be possible to demonstrate that communication between husbands and wife on matters relating to family planning was a factor that influenced fertility. Mukherjee<sup>10</sup> brought out the importance of husband wife communication on family planning matters and suggested certain policy modifications to the family planning programme and mass media coverage in order to improve family planning acceptance.

Gupta et al.<sup>11</sup> studied inter spouse communication in some pertinent areas, they found that topics of importance which never featured in inter-spouse communication were menstrual problems (44%), when to have first child (82.5%) and birth spacing (48.5%). Saleem and Isa<sup>12</sup> in their study done in Karachi, Lahore and Quetta found that strategies to cultivate a culture of inter-spousal communication on use of family planning methods should be developed as a component of family planning programs.

Although various studies have been conducted in the field of contraception and determinants of its use by men and women, there is still a paucity of studies especially in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India, where fertility rates continue to be higher than the national average. A

large number of women in the study sample belonged to the lower social class (84.8%) where usually women are not free to exert their contraceptive choices. Such scenario stress the importance of husband's involvement through participation or communication and reinforces the fact that good communication between spouses influences the decision making by them regarding contraceptive choices and their family size.

**Limitations:** The main limitation that the present study had was that only women were interviewed and the results represent only their opinion, men's views have not been taken into account.

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