

“The choice is in her hands.”: Rwandan Women’s Autonomy in Family Planning Decision-Making and Use and the Resulting Goals Achieved

Abstract:

The increase in family planning use in Rwanda has been impressive – from 17% to 64% among married women between 2005 and 2020. The most commonly used modern contraceptive method in 2020 was the implant, with 27% of married women using this method. This study is interested in understanding the experience of Rwandan women in making decisions about their family size and birth spacing desires, family planning use to achieve those plans, and their access to the tools to implant those choices. The qualitative study included 16 in-depth interviews and 8 focus group discussions with family planning nurses and current implant users split evenly by demographic and geographic area, in two districts of Rwanda, Musanze and Nyamasheke, in July 2024. The study results show that women in Rwanda are empowered to set goals, use family planning on their own terms, select long term methods that meet their birth spacing desires, and achieve their goals through the implementation of their plans and choices. When women have access to the tools necessary to plan their reproductive lives, and the autonomy to make and implement their choices, they are able to dream and work toward those dreams.

Introduction:

The increase in family planning use in Rwanda has been impressive – from 17% to 64% among married women between 2005 and 2020. The most commonly used modern contraceptive method in 2020 was the implant, with 27% of married women using this method (National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda, Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, Ministry of Health, & The DHS Program, ICF International, 2016). This study is interested in understanding the experience of Rwandan women in making decisions about their family size and birth spacing desires, family planning use to achieve those plans, and their access to the tools to implant those choices.

Methods

The qualitative study included 16 in-depth interviews and 8 focus group discussions with family planning nurses and current implant users split evenly by demographic and geographic area, in two districts of Rwanda, Musanze and Nyamasheke, in July 2024.

Results

Women’s Empowerment: Family Planning is a Women’s Right

The way that nurses and implant users talked about access to family planning information and services demonstrated how Rwandans see family planning as a human right, particularly for women. This theme of family planning as a human right arose more often among nurses and in focus group discussions than in interviews and among implant users.

When women have autonomy over their reproductive choices the quality of their individual life and families lives increases. Family planning gives women the opportunity to set goals that will shape the course of their future. Achievements such as reaching the desired amount of children, spacing between kids, financial objectives, and strengthening family development all lead to finding peace within their homes. With the support of caring providers women can make informed decisions that influence their families' lives, as well as the surrounding community. The impact that reproductive autonomy has emphasizes the importance of Rwandan women's right to choose.

Providers encourage family planning by allowing the patients to decide what they want to do with their bodies through empowerment, education, and emphasizing the right to choose.

We explain to her and we provide that method and if she doesn't want another method, she wants to get pregnant, she is free to do that. The choice is in her hands. (NN, FGD, 7/3)

You give her the information and then it is up to her to choose. (MU, FGD, 7/12, Lyse)

LARC Preference

Using long-term contraceptives gives women more opportunities to achieve personal and familial goals. Long-term contraceptives are often preferred over short-term contraceptives. This noted preference appears more in Musanze than in Nymasheke and is more often discussed in individual interviews.

A family's quality of life increases as each individual's needs are met. A long-term contraceptive is often chosen to help a family stabilize postpartum and increase their well-being. As the number of children in a family increases the amount of time spent nurturing each member can become strained or unevenly distributed. This is why longer-term methods can give women an opportunity to better care for their individual, husbands, and children's needs.

Even now I'm using the implant, me I think that it's the best method. Because when you are using family planning method, you can take care of your children, even you, you can take care of yourself. Because when you take a family planning method for a long term you have time to take care of yourself, of your family, and even your husband can consider you. And you seem like you are not getting old as fast. (Musanze IDI Nurse #1)

The benefits of long-term methods help mothers reduce their own stress while being able to support each of their children through growth.

The 3-years implant gave me peace. It also helped my child to grow up well and they [now] have good health.

Birth Spacing

Birth spacing is a goal that is commonly mentioned when families choose to use the family planning program. Birth spacing is discussed by individuals, focus groups, and nurses in Nymashake and Musanze. Long-term method choice facilitates families in reaching their goals of birth spacing. Commonly, women will discuss their desire regarding the number of children and the spacing between their nurses postpartum. Choosing to space between births can benefit the family as it gives the child more time to be nurtured.

...preparing them for the family planning methods after giving birth so that the baby can have enough time to be cared for. (NN, FGD #2, 2:49)

Women's physical health is a factor that encourages birth spacing. Adding spacing between pregnancies so women's bodies can recover after birth helps mothers' quality of life increase to care for their individual needs as well as their children.

As I have said when a mother has given birth or gone through the difficult process of being pregnant there are physiological changes that happen to the body after giving birth. There are things that must be restored in the body so that the baby can grow. (Nyma, FGD, Nurse)

Achieving Goals

The theme of achieving goals is often mentioned as a reason to utilize the family planning program. For many women setting family goals entails working towards a place of financial stability, reaching the desired number of children, and supporting their families' development. All of these factors ease a family's strain and can help their home find peace.

So then if you have used the family planning method you have time to think about your achievement or development, even the other children you are capable of finding what they can eat to make them grow well and able to have a good life. (Nyma, FGD, Users)

When women are given the opportunity to choose their spacing they can adjust to what their family needs. There is relief in being able to shift your plans as the reality of family life may

have shifted from the expectations you had originally. This flexibility is empowering and helps women continue to stay on track with their goals.

I am glad that I achieved my goal, because you see, between my first and second birth, I was stressed after giving birth to kids who are close in age. Can you imagine? Because the third are twins; it was really difficult for me. So my first experience is that this method protected me from stress, because at least between my second and the twins, there was a big enough interval. (Nyma, IDI, User)

Discussion

This study results show that women in Rwanda are empowered to set goals, use family planning on their own terms, select long term methods that meet their birth spacing desires, and achieve their goals through the implementation of their plans and choices. When women have access to the tools necessary to plan their reproductive lives, and the autonomy to make and implement their choices, they are able to dream and work toward those dreams.