

Exploring the role of Ward Development Committee on strengthening ASRH programming: A case of A360 MMA Key Influencer Engagement strategy in Northern Nigeria.

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Introduction:

The Ward Development Committee (WDC) is a social strategy aimed at improving community participation and access to primary healthcare in Nigeria. Gender norms limiting adolescent girls' autonomy in sexual and reproductive health (SRH) decisions hinder contraceptive access. WDCs offer a sustainable, low-cost way to engage key influencers like husbands and mothers-in-law. This study assessed the role of WDCs in improving SRH access for married adolescent girls aged 15-19.

Methodology:

A cross-sectional study using mixed methods. Structured surveys were conducted with 120 WDC members from both an intervention LGA (Ringim) and a control LGA (Birnin Kudu). Data were analyzed using SPSS and Chi-square tests. Qualitative insights were gathered from 4 FGDs with WDC members and 8 IDIs with husbands.

Results:

In the intervention group, 72% of WDC members supported adolescent girls discussing childbirth spacing with their partners, compared to 51% in the control ($p = 0.0926$). Additionally, 60% of the intervention group supported providing SRH information, compared to 47% in the control ($p < 0.05$). Qualitative data showed that male engagement shifted husbands' perspectives positively.

Conclusion:

Male engagement contents infused into WDCs significantly improved support for adolescent girls' SRH discussions and information access, positively influencing societal norms and partner support.

Keywords:

Ward Development Committees (WDCs), Key Influencer Engagement (KIE), Sexual and reproductive health (SRH), Husbands.

Extended Abstract

Introduction:

The Ward Development Committee (WDC) is a social strategy designed to encourage community participation and access to primary health care services in Nigeria. WDCs ensure community ownership of health issues such as health promotion, community mobilization, maternal and newborn health, nutrition, control of communicable and non-communicable diseases, and sexual and reproductive health. Social norms that promote gender inequalities and restrict adolescent girls' agency in sexual and reproductive health decisions are major barriers to contraceptive access and use in Nigeria. Interventions need to target not just adolescent girls, but also key influencers like husbands, mothers-in-law (Ahissou *et al.*, 2022). Despite the WDCs efforts in community mobilization and health promotion, there is limited focus on engaging key influencers, particularly husbands, to create an enabling environment for married adolescent girls to access ASRH services.

WDCs are a potential source of activating key influencer engagement in a sustainable, low-cost way. We hypothesized that WDCs could support an improved enabling environment for married adolescent girls to access SRH information and services.

Objective:

The study's objective was to evaluate the role of Ward Development Committees (WDCs) in promoting the use and access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services among married adolescent girls aged 15-19.

Intervention:

To ensure sustainability and strengthen the transition to a government-led adolescent sexual and reproductive health (SRH) programming in the MMA states, the project aims to amplify the demand for SRH information and services, particularly among married adolescent girls. Through its key influencer engagement strategy, the project actively engages community gatekeepers, especially the Ward Development Committees (WDCs), leveraging their structure and influence to complement the engagement of husbands through diffusion of the male engagement program curriculum.

Methodology:

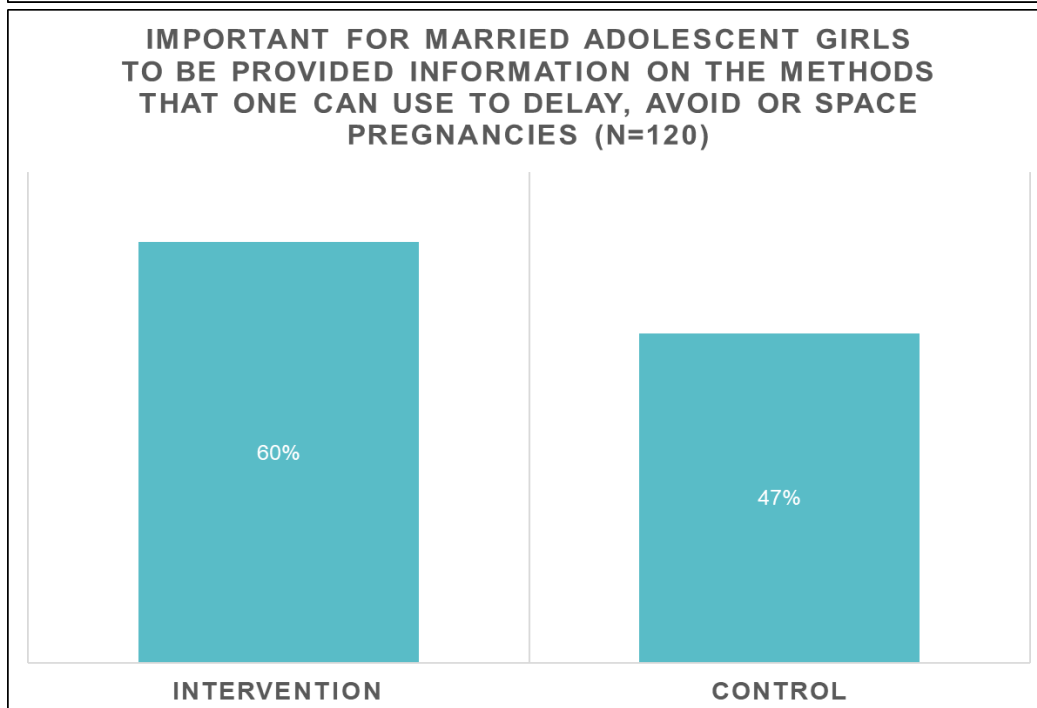
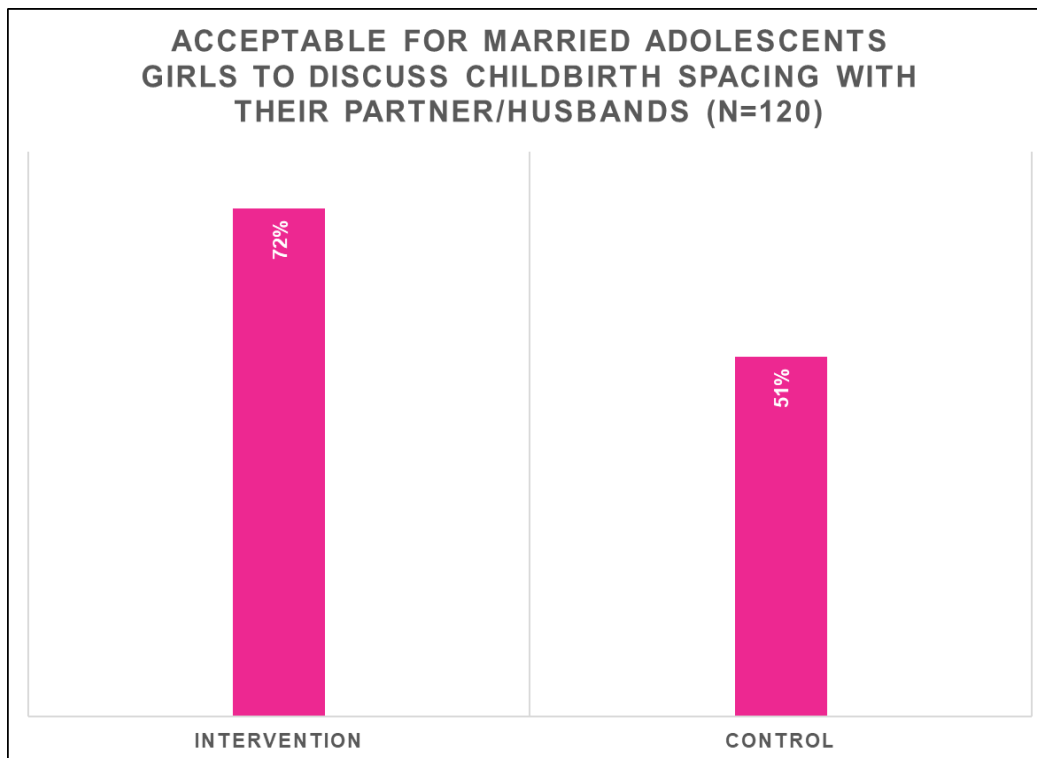
This cross-sectional study employs a mixed-method approach. The quantitative component consists of structured surveys conducted with 120 WDC members from the intervention LGA (Ringim) consisting of 10 facilities and 120 WDC members across 10 facilities from the control LGA (Birnin Kudu) to assess their knowledge and attitudes towards ASRH. Data obtained was analyzed on SPSS version 25 using Chi-square test for comparison. The qualitative component involves four structured focus group discussions (FGDs) with WDC members in the intervention LGA. Additionally, eight in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted with husbands within these LGAs to gather deeper insights into their experiences and perceptions.

Result:

The study reveals that 72% of Ward Development Committee (WDC) members in the intervention group considered it acceptable for married adolescent girls to discuss childbirth spacing with their partners, compared to 51% in the control group. Although the chi-square test did not show a statistically significant difference at the conventional 0.05 level, it was close ($p = 0.0926$). Additionally, 60% of WDC members in the intervention group believed it was important to provide these girls with information on delaying, avoiding, or spacing pregnancies, compared to 47% in the control group, with the chi-square test revealing a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$).

Qualitative findings revealed that infusion of the male engagement content into Ward Development Committees (WDCs) has positively influenced husbands' perspectives on ASRH and the importance of partner support. This engagement has fostered positive societal norms, addressing previously negative attitudes toward SRH messaging. Husbands reported a shift in their views, with many now supporting their wives in accessing SRH information and services. One participant stated, "*Supporting my wife to access SRH services and strengthening her economic behavior is very important to me. By doing so, I am not only helping her but also contributing to the overall wellbeing of our family.*"

Group	Important for married adolescent girls to be provided information on the methods that one can use to delay, avoid, or space pregnancies (n=120)	Acceptable for married adolescents' girls to discuss childbirth spacing with their partner/husbands (n=120)
Intervention	60% (n= 72)	72% (n= 87)
Control	47% (n= 56)	51% (n= 61)



Conclusion:

Exposure to male engagement content significantly improved WDC members' perception on acceptance and support for adolescent girls discussing childbirth spacing with their partners and receiving ASRH information, positively influencing societal norms on ASRH and partner support. This indicates that exposure to male engagement content has positively shifted perceptions on ASRH norms among WDCs in the intervention group.

Discussion:

The findings of this study align with previous works emphasizing the role of community engagement in health promotion. Similar to Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria's work, which highlighted the impact of Ward Development Committees (WDCs) in improving maternal and child health through community health plans and emergency transport systems, this study demonstrates the potential of WDCs to engage key influencers like husbands and community leaders in promoting adolescent sexual and reproductive health (ASRH).

The importance of male engagement in ASRH initiatives is further supported by studies, such as Agu *et al.*, (2022), which underscore the role of husbands and local leaders in reproductive health advocacy. The qualitative results reflect a positive shift in societal norms, with husbands increasingly supporting their wives' access to SRH information, consistent with interventions in other regions that successfully influenced perceptions and behaviors toward ASRH (UNFPA, 2019).

Quantitatively, differences between intervention and control groups regarding the acceptability of discussing childbirth spacing mirror findings from other ASRH programs, demonstrating the effectiveness of targeted interventions in changing attitudes and increasing knowledge among community members (USAID, 2010).

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