

MEN AS PARTNERS IN REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

This year's World Population Day will be marked by the launch of a UNFPA and ILO project on "**Men as Partners in Reproductive Health**" (MIRH) in organised workforce - pilot project in Fiji and later in Solomon Islands. The project which began in 2001 focuses on empowering men in organised workforce.

In mid 2005, UNFPA through its partnership with the International Labour Organisation (ILO), decided to target men in the workforce. This was possible through the Government, Trade Unions and Employers Association in both Fiji and Solomon Islands.

The UNFPA project initiated in 2001 through NZAID support, aims to empower men to better understand and perform their role, often as the head of the families – and joint decision makers.

Men often hold decision-making power over matters as basic as sexual relations and when and whether to have a child or even seek health care. But most reproductive health programs focus exclusively on women. UNFPA recognizes the importance of partnership between women and men, as well as the crucial need to reach out to men with services and education that enable them to share in the responsibility for reproductive health.

Men have decision-making power in their many roles as fathers, husbands, community leaders, religious leaders and political leaders. Their answers to these questions have a direct impact on maternal health:

Will a couple use contraceptives to prevent unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortions, or use condoms to prevent HIV infection? Will a midwife assist at birth? Will money be spent on transportation in case of emergency? Will a daughter complete her primary and secondary education? Will she be allowed to make her own choices in marriage and life, or will she be married too young?

Reproductive health begins with gender equality. Men play crucial roles in reproductive health as clients, partners and agents of change. Men are involved in reproductive health efforts as advocates for needed services, as supporters of their partner's needs and as recipients of services for their own health and well-being.

Husbands often make decisions about family planning, their wives' economic activities and the use of household resources, including for doctors' and school fees. These decisions influence the well-being and prospects of the whole family. The care and support of an informed husband improves pregnancy and childbirth outcomes and can mean the difference between life and death in cases of complications, when women need immediate medical care.

Research and experience finds that most men want to care for their own health and that of their sexual partners. When encouraged and provided with opportunities, many men will seek out reproductive healthcare. And, with a little support, many men are eager to challenge customs and practices that endanger women's health and are willing to participate in supportive decision-making for sexual and reproductive health.

What will the project mean for men?

Men in the workforce will now have access to access to information and services that will allow them to make an informed choice in their families.

The project will provide the following:

- Training: 80 Trainers and Counsellors have been trained who are now working in 9 Organizations in Fiji and Solomon Islands;
- Efforts will be made to institutionalise the training as part of the organisations;
- A MIRH Training Manual, 11 IEC materials in English, Hindi, Fijian and pidgin have been prepared; and
- Access to condoms and family planning advice.

Feedback from the Trade Unions and Employers' Associations have confirmed positive attitude by the management on introducing MIRH at the workplace. There is anecdotal evidence of reduction in absenteeism, improved team work, reduction in sick leave and more open discussion within the organizations on gender and RH issues. Supportive environment to discuss gender issues is evident through management agreeing to conduct regular workshops for their employees. While the IEC materials and the manual are being launched in July 2007.

UNFPA policy on men's involvement

Source: UNFPA Policies and Procedures Manual, Policy for UNFPA Support to Sexual and Reproductive Health, Population and Development, and Gender (paragraph 26). Effective 8 July 2005.

UNFPA strongly encourages working with men and women to support gender equality and equity, and to ensure consensual decision-making on sexuality and reproductive health issues. This includes promoting men's understanding of their roles and responsibilities with regard to respecting the human rights of women; protecting women's health, including supporting their partners' access to sexual and reproductive health services and reproductive health commodities; preventing unwanted pregnancy; reducing maternal mortality and morbidity; reducing transmission of STIs, including HIV/AIDS; sharing household and child-rearing responsibilities; and promoting the elimination of harmful practices and gender based violence.

Partnering with men is part of a commitment to positive change advanced by 179 countries at the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994).

MIRH and the International Conference on Population and Development *Programme of Action* – ICPD PoA, paragraph 4.24

Changes in both men's and women's knowledge, attitudes and behaviour are necessary conditions for achieving the harmonious partnership of men and women. Men play a key role in bringing about gender equality since, in most societies, men exercise preponderant power in nearly every sphere of life, ranging from personal decisions regarding the size of families to the policy and programme decisions taken at all levels of Government. It is essential to improve communication between men and women on issues of sexuality and reproductive health, and the understanding of their joint responsibilities, so that men and women are equal partners in public and private life.

Partnering with men is an important strategy for advancing reproductive health and rights, which are so closely linked to the MDGs. While men's partnership is not explicitly mentioned in the MDGs, it is essential to progress, in particular in goals 3, 5 and 6.

The Millennium Development Goals -MDG

Goals and Targets

- Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women
Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005 and in all levels of education no later than 2015
- Goal 5: Improve maternal health
Reduce by three-quarters, between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality ratio
- Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases
Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS
Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the incidence of malaria and other major diseases