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FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

ISSUE BRIEF

Family Planning Improves Quality of Life and Opportunities for Women

Family planning is primarily viewed through the prism of women's health. But research shows that women view family planning in broader terms. They believe that having smaller families and spacing births not only improve health, but increase their opportunities for education, as well as for greater domestic and community involvement.

Women are right. Women are important agents of change: They are more likely to invest first in the education and health of their children, which in turn will mitigate the direct impact of the current global economic downturn on families, particularly those at poverty level and living in developing countries. Family planning remains highly important, serving as the foundation for sound maternal health. Healthy women and mothers contribute substantively to their societies, and by extension, their countries. When women can control when and how often they have children, they improve their options and opportunities in life as well as those of their families.

According to the UNFPA, investments in education and health for women and girls have been linked to increases in productivity, agricultural yields, and national income — all of which contribute to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. For decades, research has shown that family planning is one of the most cost-effective health interventions in the developing world. Increasing the availability of family planning services is important in light of today's economy, but also because demand for family planning will grow by an estimated 40 percent during the next 15 years. Modest investments have yielded tremendous results in reducing maternal death and increasing the number of healthy births. Since the launch of the family planning program in 1965, families are better able to feed, clothe, educate, and provide quality health care for their children.

Increases educational opportunities. Women who start families before age 20 are less likely to finish school than those who wait even a few years. Early and frequent childbearing can limit women's education. The importance of family planning in allowing women to stay in school goes beyond the women themselves. Mother's education is an important predictor of children's educational attainments (1) and their future earnings. Conversely, education also improves use of family planning services. Studies show that women with as little as two or three years of formal schooling are significantly more likely to use reliable family planning methods than women with no formal education.

Increases employment opportunities. Employment allows women to earn income, which increases life options and involvement in the community. Family planning users are often more likely than non-users to take advantage of work opportunities.(1) In addition, high levels of female labor force participation and higher wages for women are associated with smaller family size. As women enjoy greater economic opportunities and family income rises, they spend more money on the education and nutrition of their children, continuing the cycle of opportunity.

Enhances quality of life. Quality of life requires good health. It also is affected by family stability, welfare of the children, and freedom to engage in activities outside the home. Studies show that freedom from fear of unplanned pregnancy improves partner relations and family well-being because the mother has more time to nurture her family. A study in the Philippines showed that contraceptive users were more likely to be involved in community activities, such as Parent-Teacher Associations, beautification projects, and religious and health activities. Women also said community projects increased their satisfaction and self-esteem by expanding their lives beyond the home. (1)

USAID funded a five-year project to investigate the effects of family planning on women's lives in 12 developing countries. Among the results:

- Most women and men are convinced that practicing family planning and having smaller families provide economic and health benefits.
- Family planning offers freedom from unplanned pregnancy and can improve sexual life, partner relations, and family well-being.

Fast Facts

- Having fewer, healthier children can reduce the economic burden on poor families and allow them to invest more in each child's care and schooling, helping to break the cycle of poverty.
- When fertility rates fall, more women join the labor force.
- Universal access to primary education and the elimination of the educational gender gap is more likely to occur where there is lower fertility, slower population growth, and later childbearing.
- Investing in family planning enables faster economic growth in nations by reducing fertility and changing the age structure and dependency ratio of a given population.
- Slower population growth places less stress on limited natural resources, including fresh water and arable land.
- Since the 1960s, family planning has reduced fertility in developing countries, from an average of six births per woman to three.
- About one-third of the 536,000 maternal deaths each year could be averted if women had access to reliable family planning methods.

USAID Programs

WomenLead. CEDPA, in partnership with USAID, annually delivers WomenLead, a flagship training program designed for women to take leadership roles in advocating for effective reproductive health policies, programs, increased funding streams, and integrated service delivery models. Reproductive health is a crucial component in the development spectrum but barriers to access, such as funding constraints and competing health priorities, have inhibited progress. This training program is designed to address these challenges by teaching women invested in the reproductive health field to be champions in their home countries to reduce barriers to effective programming.

In Nepal, a community-based program linking family planning and reproductive health services with literacy classes for women contributed to an increase in the use of family planning from 26 to 41 percent of women.

In Senegal, USAID supports TOSTAN, a nongovernmental organization that uses community-based education and literacy to mobilize and empower rural Bambara women. The program believes that "knowledge leads to development." The curriculum focused on basic reading and math, and through it, women learned more about basic life skills, health, and issues affecting the environment. The program expanded to address reproductive health issues, including nutrition, family planning, and eradication of the traditional practice of female genital cutting.

Resources: 1) Women's Voices, Women's Lives: The Impact of Family Planning: A Synthesis of Findings from the Women's Studies Project, Family Health International, by Barbara Barnett with Jane Stein, June, 1998.

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