PAA 2016 Abstract

**Title:** Menstruation, Family Planning, “Fearing Cows” and Fearing Men: How Gender Norms Influence Family Planning Uptake among the Karamojong in Uganda

**Authors:** McCadden, D., Lundgren, R., Ojanduru, L., & Velcoff, J., Shattuck, D.

**Presenting Author:** McCadden, D.

**Type:** Extended Abstract

**Topic:** Gender Ideals and Practices and Their Interaction with Reproductive Health
Background

The focus of this work is a cluster of societies settled in Northeastern Uganda that include three ethnicities: Karamojong, the Jie, and the Dodoth. Each of these groups share the same descent and speak dialects of the Nga’Karamojong language (Gray et al, 2003). The Karamojong are the largest of these groups and are among one of the last nomadic groups of East Africa. Though known as an ago-pastoralist society, their way of life is undergoing rapid change driven by multiple factors, including environmental and political forces. These forces have constrained nomadic life and resulting in challenges associated with traditional gender norms and social roles.

Cattle have been central to the Karamojong identity—a source of food and economic security. Traditionally, women resided in the manyatta (homestead), raising and feeding families, while, men grazed cattle in the kraal (extensive grazing territories). As the rest of Uganda modernized, the Karamojong were said to resist cultural changes. In fact, the Prime Minister Apolo Milton Obote stated (1963), “We shall not wait for Karamoja to develop,” which underscores a persistent impression of the Karamojong as lagging behind and holding the country back (Daily Monitor, 2012). Currently, Karamoja’s communities are adjusting from a disarmament campaign that should bring increased security in the region. However, this change has not yet resulted in improved livelihoods. Simultaneously, the region has faced climate challenges that included a severe and drought further exacerbating food scarcity (Stites and Akabwai, 2009; Huisman 2011).

Following traditional family norms, Karamojong women desire large families (mean = 5.8 children) and by 19 years old, about 30% of women have begun childbearing. Family size is also influenced by polygamy, which is fairly common (27% of men report multiple wives). Men with multiple wives often provide an equal number of children to each wife, which is influenced by societal and inter-spousal pressures. Use of modern FP is extremely low in Karamoja, even compared to the rest of the country. Only 7.4% of married women use a modern FP method. Yet the combination of high desire and low use results in a lower unmet need for FP than the national rate (21% Karamojong women, 34% national average) (Uganda Bureau of Statistics & ICF International Inc. 2012).

Previous research found that Karamojong women do not seem to be receiving FP information at key points in the health system. Only 30% of women not using a method discussed FP with a field worker or at a health facility in the past year. Opportunities are also missed when women are present in health centers, as less than 20% of postpartum mothers received FP counseling prior to discharge (Uganda Bureau of Statistics & ICF International Inc. 2012). These statistics suggest lost opportunities to spread FP messages among the Karamojong women. The Fertility Awareness for Community Transformation (FACT) Project was developed to identify new ways to fill those gaps by engaging Karamojong women, increase their knowledge about FP, particularly as it relates to fertility awareness, and help facilitate their utilization of local services.
FERTILITY AWARENESS is actionable information about fertility throughout the life course and the ability to apply this knowledge to one’s own circumstances and needs. It includes basic information about the menstrual cycle, when and how pregnancy occurs, the likelihood of pregnancy from unprotected intercourse at different times during the cycle and at different life stages, and the role of male fertility. Fertility awareness also can include information on how specific family planning methods work, how they affect fertility, and how to use them; and it can create the basis for understanding communication about and correctly using family planning.

Theoretical Focus

The research was a sub-project within the FACT Project at Georgetown University’s Institute for Reproductive Health. FACT fosters an environment where women and men can take actions to protect their reproductive health throughout the life-course. This process utilizes formative research and intervention testing to examine changes in fertility awareness and access to Fertility Awareness Methods (FAM) at the community level. Central to this project is the goal of reducing unintended pregnancies and improving reproductive health outcomes.

In Karamoja, an intervention is being developed and tested, that focuses on increasing fertility awareness through community networks. It incorporates behavior change approaches that respond to men and women’s expressed needs and concerns regarding family planning (FP) use, and addresses barriers to and facilitators of FP adoption identified through this formative research. The goal is to develop an intervention that engages individuals and groups in learning fertility awareness fundamentals and encourages them to apply this information to their own lives. It will be introduced through existing community groups, and designed to further diffuse through social networks to reach a fertility-awareness “tipping point” in the community. The work presented in this paper reflects formative research that was conducted to inform intervention development and community engagement.
Data and Research Methods

The primary objective of this qualitative study was to collect information needed to design an intervention that will be implemented in the Karamoja. We assessed participants’ knowledge of men’s and women’s fertility, FP, and menstrual hygiene. They also were asked questions about cultural factors and gender norms that affect learning about FP, motivation to use FP, social networks and information sharing, and couple communication.

Focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews (IDIs) were the data collection methods used for this study. We recruited participants through existing networks of community groups, identified community leaders and FP providers associated with our partner Save the Children International’s (SCI) existing Early Child Care and Development (ECCD) Projects in the Nadunget and Ngoleriet sub-counties of Karamoja, as described in Table 1. All participants consented to participate, and this study was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Georgetown University in Washington, DC and the Ugandan ethics committees at The AIDS Support Organization (TASO) and the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group Discussions</th>
<th>Nadunget</th>
<th>Ngoleriet</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Older women (age 25-45)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Younger women (age 15-24)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older men (age 25-50)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Younger men (age 15-24)</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>TOTAL (6 – 10 participants per FGD)</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<th>In Depth Interviews</th>
<th>Number of Interviews</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ECCD Facilitators</td>
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<td>Community Leaders</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>FP providers</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>6</td>
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172 participants were enrolled in this study (160 in FGDs, 12 in IDIs).

Research team members in the U.S. and Uganda collaborated to analyze the FGD and IDI transcripts using matrices to organize findings and identify main themes. Later, researchers presented the research findings back to the community members in Nadunget and Ngoleriet to provide post-research review of conclusions to increase the credibility and validity of findings (Creswell 1994).

Findings

Analyses revealed several important and actionable areas for intervention among the Karamojong. In general, fertility awareness and menstruation are subject to a variety of myths, social pressures, and misconceptions. Women reported a wide range of menstrual cycle durations. Some of the variability mentioned may be because tracking periods is not common among women. As one young woman expressed, “We do not keep track, we just wait until
they come. We even do not know when they will come, we just wait for them to come.” Some variability may be attributed to methods of tracking periods using the lunar cycle, as many women described. There was also an association between frequency of menstruation and fertility. More frequent menstrual periods were said to be related to higher levels of fertility. Additionally, traditional myths about menstruation persist and limit women’s activities, including interaction with others, myths associated with being around livestock. “Fearing cows” is a phenomenon that menstruating women battle and assumes that if they come into contact with a cow (walk down the same path, touch, milk the cow), the cow will become blind.

When asked, both male and female participants mentioned only a few of the various FP methods available in the region. They did not understand how many of the methods worked and often confused the methods with one-another. As described above, only a small portion of the women in the Karamoja region reported being contacted by a village health team member. These data reflect outcomes that are in-line with those statistics.

Participants described a form of natural child spacing, based on extended post-partum abstinence and the direct result of the nomadic lifestyle of Karamojong men. Traditionally, men spent about two years in the kraal with cattle before returning to the manyatta. When they returned, couples would seek to become pregnant, providing reasonable spacing of children. Data reflected how this change in lifestyle and level of interaction between couples have left them unsure about how to negotiate sex and prevent pregnancy. Participants reported the need for self-discipline and the need to establish physical separation – with women sleeping in their mothers' homes – to avoid sex. Men tended to refer to this practice as a source of cultural pride, while women viewed it is one that is challenging to maintain.

FP use was largely described as covert and hidden from men based around a fear of violence. Women may be subject to violence if they try to discuss FP with their husbands or are found to be using FP in secret. It was presumed that men associate FP use with adultery. “…most times they think that you have gotten another man and they end up beating you up and when you try to explain that the child is still young [and you want to wait before becoming pregnant] they will say you are trying to refuse or divorce [the woman] indirectly.” Some FP providers also reported that they were hesitant to provide FP to a woman without her husband’s consent, for fear of placing the woman or themselves at risk of violence from the husband. The threat of violence was frequent in these data and associated with more than use of FP.

These data reflect a Karamojong culture that is struggling between traditional and more equitable expectations for family and partnership. There tends to be support for and acknowledgement of the health benefits of spacing children, particularly in light of difficult economic circumstances and the tradition of spacing. However, the responsibility for doing spacing, as well as the blame for not, tends to lie entirely with women. Most men do not see child spacing or FP as their responsibility, and are rewarded socially for having many children. Though avoiding sex is viewed as the preferred method of spacing pregnancies by men, a woman can face conflict, violence, and accusations of unfaithfulness if she refuses to have sex with her husband, even if it is because she wants to space pregnancies. Though some
people support the use of FP methods, many women risk violence from their husband if they try to discuss FP or are found to be FP without their husbands’ knowledge.

These results indicate opportunities to position the use of modern FP methods as an extension of the long-standing cultural practice of child spacing through extended post-partum abstinence, and something that is used by men and women who want to have healthy families that they are able to provide for adequately. Addressing the gender norms that make couples hesitant to use FP will be critical to addressing unmet need. Both men and women think it is important for men to be involved in educational efforts around FP and for the couple to make the decision to use FP together.

This findings from this research have informed the content, messaging, and structure of EDEAN, a fertility awareness and family planning intervention that will be implemented in Karamoja in 2016. Through EDEAN, young women and men (18-25 years) will participate in a series of single-sex and mixed-sex peer group sessions at which they will discuss fertility awareness topics. Following the discussions, the participants will enact community theatre performances of scenarios which focus on fertility awareness messages and show individuals applying this information to their lives. Community theatre was identified as a highly acceptable and culturally relevant mode of disseminating information among the Karamojong (data not reflected in this paper). The goal of the community theatre performances to encourage dialogue and sharing of fertility awareness information throughout the community. The peer group sessions and theatre performances will focus on couple communication, menstruation, fertility, and FP methods, promoting core information and addressing misperceptions that persist in these domains. Messaging around gender equitable relationships will be promoted throughout all activities. Through engaging women, men, and communities in fertility awareness activities, EDEAN will work to spread accurate information about fertility awareness and family planning and to change gender and other social norms that pose barriers to FP use.
References


