

CASE STUDY: Making Family Planning a Lifestyle Choice with “Safal Couples” in India

Program: Youth Voices for Agency and Access (YUVAA)

Organization: Pathfinder International

Country: India

Introduction

Youth Voices for Agency and Access (YUVAA) is one of Pathfinder International’s flagship family planning projects in India. Supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Pathfinder implemented the YUVAA project in 10 high-priority districts in Bihar and Maharashtra states between 2018 and 2022. The project aimed to enhance family planning access and uptake among newly married couples and first-time parents aged 15–24 years using a social entrepreneurship model.

Drivers of Male Engagement in Family Planning

At the **individual level**, many men accept family planning. However, they do not feel a compelling need to use it, based on their perception that family planning is a women’s

issue and their own desire to prove their fertility shortly after marriage. Moreover, men are less likely to intend to use family planning methods, compared to women. A baseline survey found that 51% of men surveyed intended to use family planning, compared to 96% of women.¹ This may be partially due to the fact that men were less likely to disagree with the idea that fate determines the number of children a couple has (18% of men disagreed versus 52% of women).¹

At the **close relationship level**, many couples do not discuss family planning, with 26% of men and 54% of women reporting that they never discussed family planning with their spouses or partners.¹ A significant barrier to couple communication and joint decision making is restricted bodily autonomy and agency among women, which can hinder them from initiating conversations about family planning in their relationships.² In response, some women exercise their agency more privately, through covert use of family planning methods. Another



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driver of male engagement is gender and social norms, whereby men view family planning as a woman's issue yet hold decision-making power over family planning access and use.²

Meanwhile, at the **community level**, men often face pressure to prove their fertility early on in marriage due to gender and social norms

bias based on age, number of children, and marital status.² Another barrier to men's help-seeking and health service use is their work schedules, which conflict with regular operating hours for community health workers and health facilities, or their lack of paid sick leave, which means going without pay for health visits or appointments. This is even more of a barrier

"See, males' support is critical. But women try and hide things if the male does not support [them]. For instance, they take pills or injections, so males do not find out."

– Yuvaakaar

that fertility with masculinity.² Furthermore, if their first child is a female child, men may feel pressured to continue trying for a son, especially in communities with a strong gender preference for male children.² Many young couples also live with older family members, who may active pressure them to bear children, especially male children.² Although community and family expectations around fertility and childbearing often pose challenges to men's engagement in family planning, there are also opportunities that can be leveraged. For example, men tend to talk with more people about family planning, compared to women.¹ Men tend to talk with their friends about family planning in Bihar, while men tend to talk with health workers in Maharashtra.¹

At the **societal and institutional level**, community members most often interact with the health system through community health workers, who are mostly women. Men may be less comfortable interacting with community health workers who are women. Because participating community members are newly married couples and first-time parents aged 15–24 years, some of whom are married before the legal age of 21, they can face barriers to family planning access and use due to provider

for working class men who are unable to meet with community health workers or visit health facilities during regular operating hours.



A "Safal couple."

Intervention

The YUVAA project repositions family planning as a lifestyle choice and treats the couple as a unit, using a social entrepreneurship model. For this reason, the overarching theme is "Safal Couple" (successful couple). A "Safal Couple" communicates openly and respectfully, makes decisions jointly, and works towards their shared aspirations and goals. The tagline of "Safal

“[The] male is the person who brings up the discussion. Female, very little. Lots of people who think [using condoms is] positive... [Males] are clearly more active in these matters. They are more educated. They meet friends and others in the community and thus know about these things. Women and mother[s]-in-law in the family get nervous and get ashamed to discuss it; they wonder who is there to explain these things.”

– Yuvaakaar

Couple” is “*Soch mile, Jodi khil,*” which means a couple prospers only when their beliefs and ideas align. The YUVAA project consisted of household visits, community meetings, digital outreach and engagement, and service provider training.²

At the core of the project are the Yuvaakaars, a cadre of husband-and-wife entrepreneurs who conducted household visits and provide limited family planning methods and service provider referrals.² The Yuvaakaars counseled either one or both partners at a time, depending on client availability and preference, and used different strategies to facilitate conversations about family planning and relationship skills. For example, if a couple was less familiar or comfortable with discussing family planning, the Yuvaakaar initiated the conversation by talking about individual and shared aspirations and goals, such educational and economic opportunities, before shifting towards family planning. This initiation encouraged couples to open up about themselves and learn more about one another. These visits emphasized the importance of couple communication and joint decision making not only with regards to family planning, but also in setting and pursuing individual and shared aspirations and goals in relationships. At the end of the visit, the Yuvaakaar provided interested couples with over-the-counter methods (e.g., male condoms, oral pills) or a referral to youth-friendly service providers.² Overall, these sessions help to normalize informed discussions around family planning and create a supportive environment for mutual

respect and equality in relationships.

In addition to household visits, the Yuvaakaars also facilitated community meetings with married men, married women, and mothers-in-law.² For these meetings, they further divided the men’s group into subgroups based on age, number of children, and/or life stage—for example, newly married young men and men with one child—which helped increase their comfort and openness in discussing personal matters. During these meetings, men discussed topics such as intimacy, sexual pleasure, and financial goals and how family planning can support all these areas. To support knowledge, awareness, and approval of family planning, men shared their experiences accessing and using family planning. These community meetings helped normalize informed discussions about family planning and engaged individuals and communities in social and structural change.

Digital and mass media outreach and engagement was another important activity. Digital interventions were a strategic way to reach men as primary owners and users of mobile phones and other digital devices (94% of men in Bihar and Maharashtra owned mobile phones).¹ Men frequently use their devices to send messages, use mobile apps, and stream music.¹ It was also strategic because men who use the latest technology are viewed as modern and trendy, aspirational traits for many young men.¹ Recognizing that the channel matters as much as the content, the YUVAA project incorporated edutainment films, mobile phone

games, virtual reality activities, and other digital interventions.³ During household visits and community meetings, the Yuvaakaars introduced digital interventions like mobile phone games to allow individuals and couples to test and apply their family planning knowledge.

To increase access to youth-friendly family planning services, the YUVAA project trained around 400 public health care providers on family planning methods, including hormonal methods like the implant and injection, in Maharashtra. The training also sensitized providers to the importance of women's bodily autonomy and agency in family planning decision making. In support of increased access, the project built a network of 200 private health care providers interested in providing youth-friendly family planning services. The network remained active throughout project implementation. The project introduced providers to the mPari mobile app, which strengthened their knowledge, skills, and abilities in family planning counseling.⁴

Changes

Although project evaluations were ongoing at the time of writing, project staff observed promising shifts at various levels.

At the **individual level**, men improved their knowledge and awareness of family planning. They also reported a deeper appreciation for the role they can play in family access and use. Men also sought family planning information and services for themselves and with their spouses or partners.

At the **close relationship level**, men practiced relationships skills like couple communication and joint decision making with their spouses or partners and shared their experiences with family planning with their male peers. As a result, they were more likely to discuss family planning access and use in their relationships

and with their male peers, compared to control groups.

Interesting shifts occurred in gender expectations and roles around men's involvement as partners, as clients, and as agents of change, at the **community level**. Many men demonstrated interest in working as Yuvaakaars alongside their spouses or partners. These men became role models and mentors for young couples, educating them about family planning and relationship skills. Male peer support around family planning access and use went beyond the community meetings to include digital engagement. Men virtually connected with other men to share family planning experiences and information. The YUVAA project contributed to increased uptake of voluntary family planning methods across high-priority districts in Bihar and Maharashtra.

Finally, at the **societal and institutional level**, outreach and engagement with public and private health care providers increased access to youth-friendly family planning services and improved provider familiarity and comfort with delivering family planning counseling to young couples and young men. Working with public and private health care providers improved the enabling environment for men's engagement in family planning.

Impact: Know, Care, Do

- **Know:** More men improved their knowledge and awareness of family planning and relationship skills like couple communication and joint decision making. More men learned how to access family planning information, services, and methods.
- **Care:** More men deepened their appreciation for the role they can play in family access and use and relationship skills like couple communication and joint decision making. More men demonstrated

interest in discussing family planning with their spouses or partners and learning how to access and use family planning.

- **Do:** More men did the following: talked with their spouses or partners and male peers about family planning; practiced couple communication and joint decision making in their relationships; sought out family planning information and services; and/or supported partner uptake of a family planning method.

Takeaways

The YUVAA project provides insights into how to engage young men in a context where men accept family planning yet lack a compelling need to use it. First, family planning can feel more relevant for young men when framed as a tool that can help them set and achieve individual and shared aspirations and goals, especially around educational and economic opportunities, in relationships. Secondly, making family planning information, services, and methods more accessible and comfortable for young men can support increased uptake of family planning among newly married couples and first-time parents. Finally, digital interventions are a strategic way to reach men as primary owners and users of mobile phones and other devices and to provide them with a more convenient way to access family planning information and services.

Additional Resources

Report: [YUVAA Segmentation Report](#)

Report: [YUVAA SBCC Strategy](#)

Report: [YUVAA Baseline Survey Report](#)

Brief: [Gender Approaches in YUVAA](#)

Brief: [The Next Generation: YUVAA—Youth Voices for Agency and Access](#)

Web article: [YUVAA: Digital Innovations Creating a Community of Successful Couples](#)

Web article: [The YUVAA Family Planning App—Mobile Tech for FP Education](#)

References

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Note: Unless indicated otherwise, the source of information for this case study was an interview which Breakthrough ACTION held on March 3, 2022, with Laxmi Rao and Manish Mitra from Pathfinder International.

Credits

Author: Heang-Lee Tan

Co-Authors: Kendra Davis, Danette Wilkins

Program Review and Revision: Laxmikant Rao

Editor: Rebecca Pickard

Photos and Videos: Pathfinder International

This case study is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents are the responsibility of Breakthrough ACTION and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.