

Male Fertility Management By Imelda Bacudo

Although men often consider contraception as purely a woman's responsibility, the case is true only as long as the chosen method doesn't impinge on the male partner's satisfaction and convenience. The bedroom is yet another arena, amongst others in Philippine society, where men's decisions prevail.

It is perhaps because of this attitude that information and services related to reproductive health are almost always focused only on the women, severely limiting the chances of success for such projects. The Filipina woman's decisions about fertility management, after all, are expected to comply with the preferences of the man in her life.

Yet, in this society with a dominant Catholic church, who dares come up to the macho Filipino men and try to educate them about semen, sperm, condoms and birth control pills? The task is daunting especially in the face of the belief that a man's virility is measured by the number of his children. Who can change these men's minds, and turn them into partners of women in making informed decisions about fertility management?

As a group of health activists found out, it is the men themselves who can do this best.

In 1998, a nonprofit institution called Population Services Pilipinas (PSPPI) responded to this situation with a project dubbed "Male Call." With the objective of developing male participation in

reproductive-health concerns, PSPPI worked with NAGKAISA (United), a federation of tricycle drivers in a rapidly urbanising area just outside Manila.

In the spirit of the call made in 1994 at the International Conference on Population and Development to find more creative ways of improving the status of women world-wide, Male Call aims to help men make responsible reproductive choices, and to promote peace within the household. Thus, it is concerned not only with fertility management, but also with domestic violence and sexual health.

The project activities include structured learning workshops, led by peer educators and attended by the tricycle drivers and their partners. Here they discuss human fertility and its management, domestic violence, and the cultivation of healthy sexual practices.

Klinika Medico (KM), on the other hand, renders direct medical services to



courtesy of Male Call

members and their families. These include such services as early detection of common male complaints, Pap-smear testing for women, vasectomies, and pediatric medicine. It has become so popular that even non-members come to the clinic, and other paying clinics in the area have begun to consider it a competitor. KM has clearly managed to establish itself as a community-supported health centre.

In uplifting the condition of women, PSPI points out, the indirect but generative way is to target the transformation of men. One indicator of success for NAGKAISA was when its members voluntarily adopted a policy of meting out disciplinary measures to members found guilty of beating their wives, or if they refused to support the latter's wishes to regulate their fertility.

That was a significant achievement. NAGKAISA members tend to be aggressively male. Most are in their early 20s, married, with children, earning just over US\$5 a day, with less than 10 years of formal schooling. They hold traditional Filipino values such as the importance of having children and the woman's role in child rearing

and managing the home. They perceive their principal role as being that of breadwinner for the family.

Imagine a health education worker approaching these hardy men on motorcycles and showing them realistic drawings of the male sex organs, or engaging them in discussions about their intimate relationships. The unique challenge is to work within this framework of not only male, but Asian, sensibility.

Ronnie Reganon, PSPI's most successful health educator, describes his technique that allows him to permeate through the thick and tricky façade of the male "loob." (A key concept in Filipino culture, *loob* pertains to one's inner state.) Instead of a direct and frank approach, Reganon first establishes rapport with the individual through words and actions that will earn the latter's trust and consent to "enter his inner being." After this, he introduces Male Call and explains its objectives, only later bringing in the visual aids that are usually greeted with snickers in the beginning. "I was surprised to learn," Reganon says, "that most males are not aware of the difference between sperm and semen, among many other things."

One could say that it's another indicator of success: the growing number of people who can differentiate between sperm and semen and their role in sexual health. But then there are plenty of other gauges: decrease in the cases of domestic violence, number of people who can tell you about condoms and other contraceptive methods, and name the parts of their sexual organs as well. The new knowledge contributes towards informed decisions on fertility management.

The tricycle drivers would disseminate Male Call's message through posters attached to their vehicles and at passenger terminals. These are messages they composed themselves: "Gastos ay Talamak Kung Marami ang Anak" (Expenditures Soar with Many Children), "Karahasan ay Tigilan sa Pamamahay At Pamayanan" (Stop Violence in the Home and in the Community).

However, initiatives such as Male Call are still dependent on external funding. To address the concern for sustainability, certain methods have been developed. The structure of the workshops ensures the transfer of knowledge from trainer to participants as



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potential peer trainers themselves. Fathers and sons are invited to participate in learning about sexuality and human reproduction, and the fathers are tasked by NAGKAISA to do follow-up work.

Also being studied is the plan to transfer responsibility for Klinika Medico to the town's public health system or to a private service provider, whichever is acceptable to the members.

Even if the lack of external funding should cause the project to lose momentum, however, PSPI believes that important gains have already been made. Its partners, PSPI notes, have achieved "a heightened awareness (among members) about the relationship between societal production and human reproduction as these could lead to the universal longing for healthier, wealthier, and more peaceful lives." NAGKAISA members are now aware of

responsible sexual practices, and recognise their partner's own sexuality. They now seek medical advice. They see the interconnections between domestic abuse, fertility, contraception, and women's empowerment. And by making informed choices, the men become empowered themselves.

Already, NAGKAISA has gone beyond personal and domestic issues, to the arena of community politics. Its members, when given the opportunity to be trainers and health education activists, were empowered by the whole process where before, they used to feel inferior because of being poor and less educated. From co-governing their households with their partners, they have gone on to participate in community governance. NAGKAISA often issues position papers on relevant issues, and local politicians seek its support. The organisation

takes action as well. Recently, for example, the members stood firm on the position that they themselves, and not the town's police force, would ensure safety standards for their transport vehicles.

Thus, from being marginalised in the past, NAGKAISA's members have found a new role as a recognised force in the community. Hopefully, the assumption of responsibility in the public sphere will also be reflected in the domestic sphere. May the fathers continue to be educated and pass on knowledge to their sons and daughters. May their tricycles ply their different routes every day bearing the message of family planning and household peace. The Philippines deserves better men. ♪

Imelda Bacudo is a freelance writer and works with communities in managing natural resources in the Philippines.