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**AN EXPLORATION OF STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE MEANINGFUL MALE
PARTICIPATION IN REPRODUCTIVE, MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH CARE**

AN EXPLORATION OF STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE MEANINGFUL MALE PARTICIPATION IN REPRODUCTIVE, MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH CARE

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The need for greater knowledge, education, and responsibility of men in family healthcare is highlighted by men's activities in improving reproductive, maternal, and child health across various facets of healthcare. The study aims to explore strategies for enhancing meaningful male engagement in reproductive, maternal, and child health (RMCH) care.

Methods: Factors influencing and strategies for enhancing meaningful male participation were explored using a narrative approach to search the literature.

Results: The identified strategies were cultural sensitivity, education for men, male-friendly health facilities, community-based programmes, good policies, and facilities. The exploration implies that families can benefit overall when men are encouraged to participate meaningfully in various activities of different stages of reproduction, maternal, and child health.

Conclusion: Men are to be motivated to actively engage in all phases of reproductive, maternal, including child health care, and in the implementation of the identified strategies to enhance men's engagement positively.

Keywords: Child-health, Male-participation, Maternal, Reproductive, Strategies.

INTRODUCTION

In the early nineties, the importance of men in reproductive, maternal, and child health (RMNCH) gained global recognition.¹ International conferences were held in Cairo in 1994 and Beijing in 1995 by the International Conference on Population and Development, the World Conference for Women, and the 48th UN Commission on the Status of Women, focused on initiatives to increase male spousal involvement in reproductive health and maternal and newborn care.^{2,3} These initiatives by these organisations are aimed at promoting male participation in maternal and newborn care to reduce mother-child morbidity and mortality, especially in low-income countries.^{4,5}

In middle and low-income countries, maternal-child health care is perceived by the majority of the populace as the prerogative of women only, and men are seen as being marginalized when it comes to maternal reproductive health.⁶ Most maternal healthcare programs are directed at pregnant women by educating them on prenatal, intranatal, and postnatal care, including child care. Male spouses have been left behind in accessing or participating in MCH, which has corroborated the perception about the need for their involvement in the care of women during pregnancy, labour, and after childbirth as being women-exclusive, and they are expected to carry the pregnancy and give birth. Men in middle-income countries are economically and reproductively significant in the family care process.^{7,8}

Men have been perceived to be at a disadvantage in maternal and child health (MCH), buttressing the impression that pregnancy, childbirth, and childcare are exclusively women's responsibilities. This continual perception limits male involvement in critical aspects of reproductive health. In low and middle-income resource countries, men are indispensable in the economic and reproductive well-being of their families.⁹ They significantly influence decisions on reproductive health, resource allocation, and the use of family planning methods.¹⁰ However, despite their significant contributions to household welfare, many men have limited awareness of their actual responsibilities in reproductive, maternal, and child health care.¹¹ Addressing this gap is essential in promoting a more inclusive and supportive approach to MCH.

Traditionally, in patriarchal settings, men are not inclined to be engaged in maternal and child health, hence the need for exploration of strategies for the improvement of male participation in reproductive, maternal, and child healthcare.¹² The non-inclusion needs an explanation for less inclination to participate in maternal and reproductive health, and are incapable of making educated judgments in times of need. Male spouse participation in this care will substantially impact overall well-being within the family health care; hence, the exploration of the strategies for Male spouse engagement in reproductive health issues.

This paper aims to assess and explore strategies for improving male involvement in reproductive, maternal, and child health (RMCH) care. It focuses on examining the important activities across various stages of reproduction, maternal, and child healthcare, while also identifying the determinants of men's participation. Additionally, the paper outlines the benefits of male engagement and proposes practical strategies to enhance their participation in RMCH care.

METHODS

The search strategy utilized keywords and phrases such as "Concepts of Male Involvement in Maternal and Child Health," "Male Involvement during Different Phases of Reproduction," "Maternal and Child Health Care," and "Strategies to Improve Male Engagement in Reproductive, Maternal, and Child Health Care."

The literature search focused on studies examining the factors or determinants influencing male engagement in reproductive, maternal, and child health, as well as those that focus on the benefits of male involvement and evidence-based strategies. It also included research on strategies and interventions aimed at enhancing male participation in reproductive, maternal, and child healthcare. Also, studies that exclusively addressed female reproductive health conditions without considering male involvement were excluded.

The theoretical model that underpinned this review is the socio-ecological model. (SEM). It is used to identify and develop meaningful strategies aimed at improving male involvement in reproductive, maternal, and child health. The SEM is detailed for understanding the multifaceted factors that influence the participation of males at all phases of reproductive, maternal, and child health. The model focuses on targeting the factors at various levels of the individual, relationships, community, institutions, environment, and the policy makers.

RESULTS

Understanding the Concept of Men's Involvement/Engagement

Involving fathers in women's and children's wellness is crucial in any community for the betterment of the health of women, girls, and children. It could be described as the positive, responsive action of fathers and other men in the community to support, advocate, and facilitate access to better healthcare facilities and services for their spouses, girls, and children. Male involvement is an aspect of care in reproductive, maternal, and child

health care that improves the outcome of the mother and child.

Male participation in family health encompasses all men in the community to support their family health, for smooth access to health care in health facilities. Despite this, men's participation is limited, especially in low-resource settings, because of socio-economic and cultural impediments in a male-dominated society that restricts women's decision-making power, autonomy, and access to health care services.¹

Men's hesitation in being involved is due to poor information and a lack of health education on reproductive and family health issues within society. However, this significantly contributes negatively, as evident in infant and maternal mortality in rural communities of developing countries.¹³

Men's Participation in Various Facets of Reproduction and Family Health Care

The inclusion of men in Reproductive, Women's, and Children's health care is to be gradual and continuous throughout the family health care process. The support of men is critically needed during antenatal, intranatal, and postnatal care, immunization, child-rearing, reproductive health, and family planning.^{3,14,15,16}

Antenatal Care

The reported participation rates of men in antenatal care visits, as documented in Ghana and Nigeria reveal variations in men's involvement across different settings.^{3,7} Understanding these differences can provide insights into the participation of men in reproductive, maternal, and child health at all stages of health care in low-income countries.

In Ghana, it was reported that 39.3% and 35% of men who participated in antenatal visits were very low, while capturing some male involvement.^{2,3} The mention of the values being "very low compared to their study" suggests that the rates observed in Ghana may be lower than those reported in other studies or regions. The socio-cultural, economic, and healthcare system factors can significantly

contribute to variations in male involvement across different studies and countries. Referring to countries as being "very low-income countries" indicates a recognition of the economic context, which can impact healthcare utilization patterns. Also, the acknowledgment of a relatively small sample size in research suggests a need for caution in generalizing findings to the broader population. However, in Nigeria, as reported, a higher percentage of men are involved in antenatal care, specifically 54.5%.³ This contrasts with the lower percentages reported in Ghana, highlighting potential variations in male involvement between countries.^{3,17}

The predictors of male engagement in antenatal care are sociocultural traditions, healthcare policies, and awareness campaigns, and identify barriers that may contribute to lower participation rates and facilitators that may enhance male engagement. In recognizing the importance, understanding, and addressing the factors contributing to male involvement during antenatal care, therefore, need for tailored interventions and programs to the specific context of each country, considering economic, cultural, and healthcare system factors.

Men can actively participate by accompanying their spouses to the antenatal clinics, learning the pregnancy process, and providing psychological and practical support to women. Male involvement during the antenatal period has been a correlate of positive outcomes, including increased attendance at antenatal care visits, better adherence to recommended health behaviours, and improved maternal mental health.

Men's position in decision-making and financial dominance significantly impacts women's utilization of antenatal care. The low participation of males in maternal health care is attributed to feelings of marginalization and exclusion from contact with maternal and child health.^{18, 19}

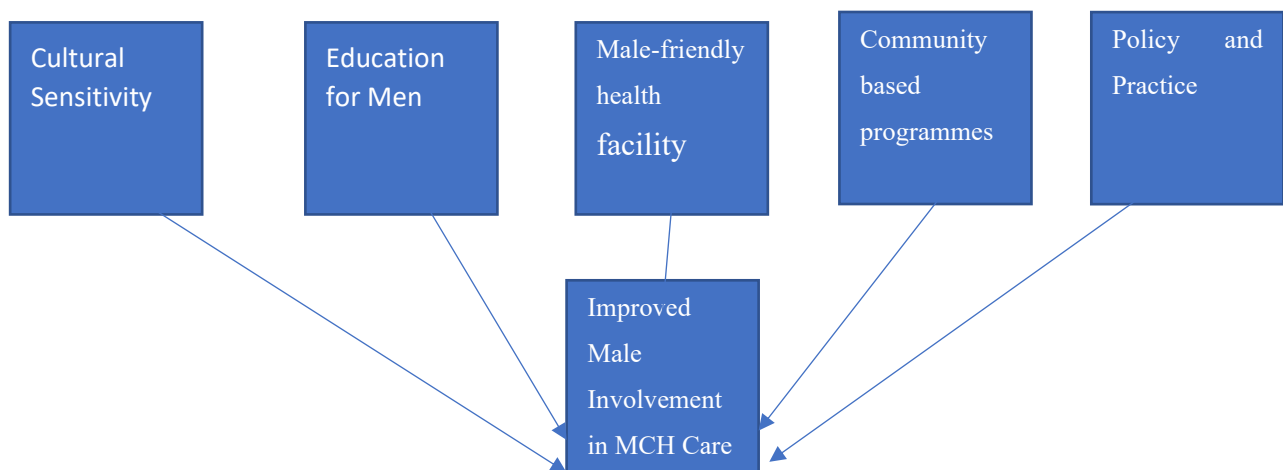


Fig 1: Conceptual Framework for Enhancing Male Participation in Reproductive, Maternal, and Child Health Care.

Intra-natal/labour

Male spousal participation during childbirth encompasses discussions on the mode and place of delivery, financial and emotional support, and following their female partner to the health facilities for delivery. The attendance reported in labor was 27.5%, suggesting that a relatively small percentage of men are present during the childbirth process.²⁰ This figure is deemed low, especially when compared to other studies that adhere to the traditional practices of conducting deliveries at the mother's place. Additionally, several factors, such as cultural, societal, or healthcare system differences, could lower the attendance rate. It would be valuable to explore the reasons behind this discrepancy to understand if there are specific challenges, preferences, or barriers influencing the choice of attendance during labour in this particular context. Traditional healthcare worker attitudes and institutional policies, such as restricting men from labour wards, contribute to low involvement.

Cultural family dynamics, including decision-making made by in-laws, influence birth outcomes, and lower partner attendance at prenatal checkups is associated with an increased risk of low-birth-weight infants.²¹

Men can provide emotional support during labor, assist with decision-making, and actively participate in birthing classes to enhance their understanding of the labour process. Active male participation during childbirth positively impacts maternal satisfaction and emotional well-being.²² It can also strengthen the emotional bond between partners and increase the likelihood of timely and safe deliveries.

Postnatal period

Men can assist with household chores, provide emotional support, and actively engage in caregiving responsibilities for the newborn, promoting a supportive environment for both mother and child. Male involvement in the postnatal period is related to the improved health of the mother and child. It contributes to better breastfeeding practices, postpartum care, and emphasizes the critical need for male involvement.²³ Husbands may advise rest after delivery, but direct support is often lacking. Health professionals' support for breastfeeding is significant during the postnatal period. It was revealed in the study that men advised their spouses to rest, but they did not assist in doing house chores to ensure the rest being advised.²⁴

Child Rearing Practices and Immunization of Children

Knowledge and practices regarding child immunization among men vary, with some studies reporting low male involvement in following their spouses for their child's immunization. Male involvement in child immunization programs is linked to higher rates of vaccination coverage.²⁵ Also, it can lead to a significant comprehension and acceptance of vaccines within communities. Men are to follow their spouses to immunization clinics, be involved in community mobilization, emphasise and corroborate the significance of a timely immunisation for children. In the immunization of children, men are to be involved in designing implementation, evaluation strategies, and immunization policies.¹³

In a study in Kerala, it was reported that few men had good knowledge (10.9%), 32.7% had good practice, and 99.1% had good attitude about their child's immunization.²⁶ On the contrary, a study that determined the percentage of males who followed their spouses for child immunization was very low.²⁷ Generally, men feel that a child's care is a woman's responsibility and as such their participation is very low, with reasons of having other tasks (29.3%), embarrassment (15.0% and lack of knowledge (2.7%). Conversely, other research showed that with increased participation of males, the nutritional status of the children also improved.¹⁴

A better nutritional status in children is associated with increased male participation in child-rearing.²⁸ Fathers can actively participate in feeding, bathing, and playing with the child, as well as attending parenting classes to enhance their caregiving skills. Fathers can purchase raw, nutritious foods, enforce nutritious food ethos and regulations, exchange information, and share knowledge on nutritious foods to encourage strong support of fathers to sustain a family-focused lifestyle intervention to maximize the nurturing care required of fathers in a family household.^{29,30} The participatory role of

fathers in child-rearing practices positively correlates with the outcomes of child development. It also promotes shared responsibilities, strengthens the father-child bond, and contributes to a supportive family environment.

Involvement of men in Reproductive Health and Family Planning

Enhancement of male engagement in reproductive health and family planning includes various methods to enhance men's contributions to women's health, reproductive health issues concerning reproductive rights and behaviours. There are contraceptive options for men, but family planning providers predominantly focus on women as if women are the culprits in practicing family planning, thus making male contraception a small proportion of total global contraceptive utilisation. The use of male birth control practices in a planned-parenthood is attributed to 25 percent of all contraceptive use globally, without any change since the 1980s.^{31,32}

Men can engage in open, interactive, and positive reproductive communication with their female spouses about contraceptive options, attend family planning clinics together, and actively support and respect their partner's choices. The participatory discussions and decisions on planned parenthood will contribute to the overall well-being of the family.^{33,34}

Strategies to Enhance Male Participation in Reproductive, Maternal, and Child Health Care

Strategies for reproductive healthcare needs include engagement and education of men on healthcare issues and behaviours in the family, which is assumed to motivate them in maternity and child healthcare issues.³⁵ The interventions or strategies for engaging men in maternal and child healthcare-seeking behaviours are to enhance positive home care practices and to support more equitable, positive communication and joint decision-making in the family.

Male involvement is globally recognized as a crucial strategy for improving the healthcare

of women and children during pregnancy, labour, postnatal care, child immunization, and reproductive health.³⁶ But, in low and middle-income countries, male involvement in child healthcare (MCH) remains limited due to factors like education, occupation, cultural practices, awareness of health needs, and friendly healthcare facilities for men. Context-specific strategies to bridge policy and practice gaps and enhance male involvement in MCH care were identified.^{10, 27} The individual attitudes and health-seeking behaviours, household socio-economic statuses, community socio-political structures, healthcare system capacities, types of services, service provider professionalism, policy frameworks, and availability of resources that support male involvement interventions influence the success or failure of male involvement in MCH.

Many factors determine the success or failure of male involvement (MI) in maternal and child health (MCH). Among these factors are individual attitudes and health-seeking behaviours, household socio-economic statuses, community socio-political structures, healthcare system capacities, types of services, service provider professional competencies, policy frameworks, and availability of resources are significant in male involvement interventions. It was noted by these authors that none of the interventions can be used in isolation.⁸ Combining these interventions would be appropriate as strategies for enhancing male participation in MCH.

Promoting men's involvement in maternal healthcare services requires several strategies that are broadly categorized as follows:

- Cultural sensitivity
- Education for men.
- Male-friendly health facility
- Community-based programmes
- Policy and Practice

Culture is a way of life, and it varies from one community to another. Some local norms and assumptions of reproductive health as

women's domain, rivalry among co-wives, and fear of mockery mitigate male involvement in maternal and child health care.³⁷ Also, decision-making regarding maternal and child health care is likely to be made either by male elders in the family or by the husbands. It is therefore pertinent that enlightening and engagement programs should include the key stakeholders in decision-making by making them relevant to maternal and child healthcare issues.

Education programme for men

In a study, the participants reported knowledge deficit in maternal health care was the main reason for the lack of male involvement. For the improvement of the couples' knowledge, a well-designed educational programme in its simplest form should be put in place to positively influence male in their engagement in MCH care.³⁸ As regards health education on strategies for improving male participation in making decisions on RMCH care, the advantages of male participation should be stressed, and women's health is crucial; therefore, health education that is male-specific on reproductive health should be emphasized, and taboos and folklore on male participation should be demystified. Public health communication should leverage radio, television, and social media to run campaigns designed to inform men about MCH, especially targeting rural or lower-literacy populations. For wider coverage, MCH topics should be introduced in men's daily routines, such as in places of work or social gatherings (e.g., sports venues).³⁵ This will improve the awareness and understanding of maternal health risks, childbirth processes, and infant care among men. It will also enhance male support for healthcare-seeking behavior by women, reducing delays in receiving care. It will ultimately shift the male negative attitudes toward shared responsibility during pregnancy and child-rearing. Generally, the impact of male spousal participation on health outcomes for mothers and children correlated with the men's educational status, understanding of the expected roles in reproduction, attitude, and behaviours in maternal and child health care.^{39,40, 41}

Male-friendly health facilities

Health centers are to be designed primarily in such a way that they will be welcoming to males. The health facilities should provide spaces such as private consulting rooms that will not discourage men from feeling free to be engaged and also accompany their spouses for maternal care. Health centers could also introduce male-targeted reproductive health services, such as planned family and sexual and reproductive health counseling, which would indirectly support women's health by promoting responsible fatherhood and shared decision-making in contraception. Men are to be included in childbirth preparation classes, counseling sessions, and antenatal visits, as this will foster a conducive environment where they feel their presence and involvement are necessary and valued.

Some authors emphasized that in engaging men in MCH care, the waiting time has to be reduced, and priorities should be given to men who follow their spouses to the health facilities. Also, they should be given priority, cautiously attended to, to raise their self-esteem.¹²

Community-based programmes

Men in the community can be encouraged to form various groups or societies to mobilise men to altruistically engage in reproductive health, maternal and child healthcare. The different groups formed are to significantly prioritize issues associated with MCH without prejudice. The formed groups can also serve as platforms for sharing knowledge and experiences, and give practical advice on how men can actively be involved and support their spouses during pregnancy and childcare.¹³

Healthcare providers can also visit the couples in their homes to educate couples on the roles of men in maternal and child health care. It is also to reinforce the advantages of male participation in maternal and child health care, and for men to perceive it as a shared responsibility among couples. Incentives such as loans can be given as awards and celebrations for men who are actively

involved in MCH programmes. This will promote male participation in the community.

Health Policies and Practices

There is a global reflection and consensus on male involvement as an integral part of the reproductive health program, as channeled by 180 member countries, at a conference by the International Conference for Population and Development. A policy statement was declared and highlighted male responsibilities and participation, and among the recommended actions are:

In fostering male involvement in reproduction and maternal health, significant efforts have to be made to involve them in active parenthood. Thus, men are to participate in all aspects of maternal-child health and reproduction. The equality of value given to the children of both sexes should not be compromised. Harmful norms and stereotypes of gender discrimination should be discouraged. All these are to promote family health in the household and the society at large.⁴²

Additionally, men are to be involved fully in family planning programmes. Effective and non-passive communication and shared decision-making on family size and family planning matters among couples need to be encouraged, as male responsibility for sexual health and fertility.^{43,44, 45}

Promoting male involvement in MCH could be achieved through a multi-sectoral approach that involves the Government, the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), and the private sector. The government can partner with the NGOs, while the private sector's contribution is through corporate social responsibility by sponsoring programmes on reproductive health education and participation among men. The multi-sectoral activities of the various organizations are to be monitored and evaluated through the local and national health systems for better coordination, scaling up of successful initiatives, and reducing fragmentation of efforts in enhancing male involvement in reproductive, maternal, and child health care. It was therefore submitted that policies that

back engagement of male workers in the MCH department, health care services providing male health care needs, and rescheduling of MCH service working days, and extending the service hours for male attendees, and rescheduling of MCH working days as well as extending the hours of services till late afternoon are strategies for male involvement.¹²

Implications for Nursing Education, Research, and Practice

This exploration broadens the potential for male involvement programmes and reveals the need to minimize the potential negative side effects of MI interventions. It might also facilitate the synthesis of research findings and strengthen the existing evidence on male involvement programmes. It might also assist nurses and policymakers in making appropriate strategic decisions to improve male involvement in reproductive health issues.

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CONCLUSION

Men's responsibilities in promoting reproductive, maternal child health are multifaceted across various phases of maternal health, emphasizing the need for increased awareness, education, and active involvement of men in reproductive, maternal, and child health care. Continuous male involvement throughout the entire reproductive and family care cycle is paramount for achieving positive health outcomes for mothers and children. Engaging men in various activities and encouraging their participation in different phases of MCH care contributed to the totality of family well-being.

Recommendation

It is therefore recommended that men are to be motivated to actively engage in all phases of reproductive, maternal, including child health care, and in the implementation of the

identified strategies to enhance men's engagement positively (figure 1).

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