

Religious support boosts acceptance of birth spacing

In remote areas, religious leaders can play a vital role in improving the reproductive health of women and children. This is because decision-making is guided by social and religious norms, and religious leaders hold a strong influence on decisions regarding family planning. National Rural Support Program (NRSP) under the Population Services International (PSI) — RSPN Reproductive Health through Social Marketing (RHSM) project in Rahim Yar Khan involved a religious leader Mr. Muhammad Akram as a Community Resource Person (CRP) for the project. Mr. Muhammad Akram is the prayer leader of the mosque in his assigned area. He is an educated and well-respected leader in his community.



Over the past 15 months, Mr. Akram educated the villagers through various community platforms about the importance of birth spacing. He successfully turned 50 percent of families into new users of RH services. The community responded positively to Mr. Akram's guidance, demonstrating that religious support on the topic can ease the acceptance of birth spacing. He proved that proper guidance and continuous education in the light of religious values can improve the reproductive health of women in these uncovered remote areas.

Mr. Muhammad Akram told us that initially he was not happy with his selection. "I was not willing to be a CRP as I was convinced that like other such initiatives the RHSM project would focus on family planning through only birth control. I reluctantly accepted, but after attending the six-day training program, I found out that the project is not about birth control but about the healthy timing and spacing of pregnancy. Although I have memorized the Holy Quran, I was not taught with translation and therefore remained unaware about the emphasis laid on a minimum of two years birth spacing."

Birth spacing is very helpful health intervention as it ensures better health of both mother and her children", Mr. Akram continued. "The training program also helped me understand various methods that a couple can use, and the role of husbands in birth spacing. The presentations and discussions of senior religious leaders further helped me to understand the importance of these concepts, explained to me and convinced me to enhance my role in the community for the greater cause."

He maintained that after his training, he organized and conducted seven group meetings with 140 husbands and sensitized them about their role in adopting healthy birth spacing practices. Most importantly, he discussed the issue in a manner that encouraged couples to make joint decisions on spacing. In the end, Mr. Akram said, "I am thankful to project team and village health committee for providing me an opportunity to become a CRP and make me understand the concept of family planning. I will also share what I have learned through my weekly Friday sermons as I now firmly believe that family planning and healthy timing and spacing of pregnancy are permitted in Islam and that they are an important foundation for improving family health."

The support of religious leadership is crucial in bringing a positive change in these remote areas.