

Lactational Amenorrhea Method (LAM) Ambassadors: Local champions providing peer support, counseling, and advocacy for LAM

The Healthy Fertility Study (HFS), conducted in eight unions of Sylhet District in Bangladesh, is funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Previously implemented by the ACCESS-FP Program and the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, the study is a partnership between USAID's flagship Maternal and Child Health Integrated Program (MCHIP), the Bangladesh Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, and two local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) -- Shimantik and the Center for Data Processing and Analysis (CDPA). Sylhet district has the highest rates of maternal and newborn mortality and the lowest rates of contraceptive use in Bangladesh. The study integrates postpartum family planning activities within a community-based newborn and maternal care program, which has demonstrated results in reducing newborn mortality. The study follows 2,247 pregnant women in four intervention unions and 2,257 women in four control unions from pregnancy to three years after delivery.



The HFS Community-based Advocacy and Behavior Change Communication strategy uses a two-pronged approach including: (a) strengthening the capacity of health and family planning workers operating in the intervention area, and (b) working at the community level through one-to-one communication and counseling by community health workers, and social mobilization and community participation facilitated by community mobilizers. One key activity within the second prong of the strategy is the **Lactational Amenorrhea Method (LAM) Ambassador Initiative**.

The purpose of the LAM Ambassador Initiative is to increase community support and increase awareness of LAM and exclusive breastfeeding. Building on the peer counseling model, similar to the mother-to-mother model widely used in the promotion of breastfeeding, LAM Ambassadors are influential community members who have successfully practiced LAM and who commit to counseling others in their household or neighborhood on LAM. LAM Ambassadors are responsible for counseling friends and neighbors about the importance of LAM, and building support for the practice among other influential members of the community. Between 2008 and 2011, 336 LAM Ambassadors were identified in the HFS program sites.

LAM Ambassador Selection Criteria

Women and their husbands may be selected as LAM Ambassadors if they:

- Have successfully practiced LAM for two to six months
- Are influential in the community or frequently visit neighbors during free time

Activities: LAM Ambassadors are tasked with promoting LAM among their pregnant and postpartum neighbors and extended family members. They conduct household visits, where they counsel women and mothers-in-law on good breastfeeding practices, the criteria and benefits of LAM, and the importance of timely transition to another modern family planning method when one of the criteria changes. They also share their own personal experience with practicing LAM. LAM Ambassadors distribute leaflets with visual depictions of the LAM criteria which families can keep for future reference. Community mobilizers work with LAM Ambassadors and other local influential community members to build high-level support for the practice.

Selection Process: LAM Ambassadors are

identified by local community mobilizers. Community mobilizers identify pregnant women (and their husbands) with high levels of social connectedness and influence. These influential individuals may include local politicians, wives of local religious leaders, health workers, and teachers. After identifying potential LAM Ambassadors, the community mobilizer makes several visits to counsel the individual about LAM. CHWs also counsel the woman about LAM during scheduled antenatal and postpartum visits. The community mobilizer monitors these LAM Ambassador candidates and selects those women as LAM Ambassadors who practice LAM for at least the first two months postpartum.

Initially, the HFS team aimed to identify at least one LAM Ambassador in every cluster of intervention unions (a cluster is one CHW catchment area with average population of 4000). However, to enhance sustainability and reach more women, a new, more ambitious target was set: one LAM Ambassador per 400-500 population in the intervention sites.



Recognition: LAM Ambassadors are honored at a community ceremony, where they receive certificates in recognition for committing to advocate for LAM within their communities. Women (and their husbands) bring their healthy infants to the ceremony, and are officially recognized by the union chairman and members, community leaders, and government officials as “LAM Ambassadors” and “Exclusively Breastfed Babies.” Ceremonies are usually attended by 25-30 community members. The recognition ceremony is an opportunity to further promote LAM among other community influentials.

Awareness Raising: Community mobilizers educate LAM Ambassadors about the LAM criteria, benefits of exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months, and importance of timely transition to another family planning method.

Preliminary Findings: Community mobilizers report that the LAM Ambassador Initiative method is gaining influence and increasing acceptance of LAM. LAM Ambassadors have reported that they can tell that infants who are exclusively breastfed through LAM are healthier (they cited fewer cases of cough and diarrhea) than their earlier children who were only partially breastfed. This positive infant health outcome may also facilitate families’ future acceptance of messages on the importance of transitioning from LAM to another modern family planning method at six months postpartum.

Keys to Success:

- **Ongoing monitoring:** HFS implementers recognize the importance of monitoring LAM Ambassador activities and providing ongoing encouragement and support for their efforts in order to ensure sustained commitments.
- **Connecting LAM Ambassadors:** HFS implementers have found that creating opportunities for LAM Ambassadors to share experiences and support each other is vital to sustaining commitment and enthusiasm for their activities.
- **Involving the family unit:** HFS implementers have learned that in order to build community support for LAM, it is important to engage husbands, mothers-in-law, and other family members (who often play a vital role in influencing women’s postpartum/contraceptive choices) in the dialogue.

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