

## ***Zimbabwe***

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# ***The Consequences of Family Planning for Women's Quality of Life***

**Jane Mutambirwa with Verna Utete, Chris Mutambirwa  
and Patricia Maramba**



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**University of Zimbabwe Medical School  
Department of Psychiatry**

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**This summary highlights findings from a larger scientific report and includes recommendations from in-country researchers**

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## **Consequences of Family Planning for Women's Quality of Life**

### **I Introduction**

This study is one of four subprojects in Zimbabwe, supported by the Women's Studies Project at Family Health International, to explore the impact of family planning on women's participation in the development process, each study addresses a different aspect of the issue. The study described here explores cultural constructions of quality of life in an effort to understand women's and men's views on how fertility, and how women's participation or nonparticipation in activities inside and outside the household, may negatively or positively influence the quality of their lives.

### **II Background**

Zimbabwe's national family planning program is considered one of the most successful in Africa in increasing contraceptive use and decreasing birth rates. Successive Zimbabwe Demographic Health Surveys (DHS) conducted since independence in 1980, have shown a remarkable increase in contraceptive prevalence among married women, increasing from less than 10 percent in 1980 to 48 percent in 1994. Reports by the DHS also show declines in total fertility rates, from 6.5 in 1984 to 5.5 in 1988 and an estimated 4.3 in 1994.

The researchers who designed this study believe that beyond the statistics, family planning is not an end to itself, but a means for women to achieve a better quality of life. Yet reproductive health providers and policymakers may have little understanding of what quality of life means to the average woman, or how women relate use of a contraceptive method to the rest of their lives. Zimbabweans acknowledge many advantages of family planning. For example, a study by Mutambirwa (1986) on women's perceptions of family planning reveals that women see birth spacing as an integral part of childbearing and childrearing education, that family and elders reinforce child spacing because of its benefits to the mother, the child, and the family, and that women who are employed outside the home have higher status and more influence in domestic affairs than those who do not work. However, quality of life for women is still not well understood, and many less apparent consequences of contraceptive use, both negative and positive, have yet to be explored. Thus, the aim of this study was to discover the subjective meanings of women's quality of life in relation to fertility and to their participation in development, from the perspectives of both women and men.

### III Practical and Strategic Interests of Women

The participation of women in development is, itself, an elusive concept. Family planning policy-makers may assume lower fertility leads to greater opportunity for women to advance their education, seek employment, exercise leadership in public affairs, and generally increase the quality of their lives. But does it? If family planning enhances the quality of life for women, is it because women with fewer children are able to overcome the sexual division of labor and participate fully in economic and political domains?

Moser (1989) draws attention to the triple roles of women: responsibility for reproductive work (childbearing and childrearing), productive work (income generation), and community management (local support activities). She also distinguishes between *practical* and *strategic* gender needs of women. Practical needs usually arise from the immediate demands imposed on women by virtue of their gender roles in society: caring for children, supplementing family income, helping to improve the community. Strategic needs, on the other hand, address fundamental relationships between men and women, such as the sexual division of labor, subordinate relationships in the work place, and competition for political leadership.

For purposes of this study, participation in development is examined in two broad domains of women's lives: the work force and the community, including political activity. Decision-making in a third domain: the household, is included because of its centrality to women's lives. The study focuses on household, economic and community/political domains in an effort to understand women's practical and strategic gender interests in each area.

### IV Study Objectives

The objectives of this study were to

- Define quality of life from the perspectives of women and men participating in the study
- Explore women's and men's views on the associations between quality of life and the status of women in the following domains:
  - household decision-making regarding family size, use of household income, and children's education,
  - allocation of time for domestic responsibilities, income-generating work and leisure, participation in the labor force, and
  - participation in community advocacy and political activities
- Examine women's assessment of both the positive and negative consequences of family planning use or nonuse for women's quality of life

- Describe strategies women develop in response to negative effects of contraceptive use/nonuse on the quality of their lives as defined by them

## **V Research Methods**

This qualitative study collected data in 16 focus group discussions, 13 with women and three with men, in the Mashonaland East province of Zimbabwe. Mashonaland East is neither the most nor the least developed area of the country and, therefore, represents a mid-level socioeconomic context for the study. The data were collected in an urban area and in two rural areas having different patterns of land tenure: communal and commercial farms. Communal settlements operate under the old land tenure system of colonial Rhodesia – clusters of villages administered by headmen and local village councils. Commercial farms are typically large private enterprises employing migrant workers housed on the premises. Researchers believed that social structural differences between urban and rural communities, and between the two patterns of rural settlement, would influence cultural definitions of women's quality of life in the domains of this study. (At the writing of this report, analysis of urban-rural differences had not been completed.)

Prior to the qualitative study and following a review of relevant literature and statistical data, the researchers conducted two preliminary focus group discussions with women and one with men to identify issues, perspectives, and terminology for use in constructing the research guide. The guide was pretested in Epworth – a peri-urban community of Harare, then revised. The principal investigator worked with local administrators and service providers to secure permission for the research and introduce the study in communities. The research team included local assistants who helped with a variety of tasks, from identifying eligible participants to caring for participants' children during the data collection. Standard procedures for protection of human subjects were carried out.

Focus group sessions were audiotaped and transcribed in the original Shona. Data analysis, conducted by the Zimbabwean research team, proceeded with the use of a grid, which summarized themes and subthemes related to the research objectives. Results were shared at meetings with residents of the communities in which the research was conducted, and their comments incorporated in a preliminary report. For the most part, community residents concurred with the findings. Women, however, expressed surprise at the extent to which men seemed to share women's views on factors that contribute to quality of life. Men in the community supported the validity of the data from male focus groups, concurring with definitions of quality of life and reinforcing men's awareness of the domestic burden women shoulder in their roles as wives and mothers.

## **VI Results**

The results reported here are based on a partial analysis of the focus group transcripts and must, therefore, be viewed as preliminary. Quotes used in the text are taken from a more detailed

preliminary report prepared by the principal investigator, Dr Jane Mutambirwa The Shona transcripts are not yet available in English

### **A**            *Defining Quality of Life*

The central research question and organizing focus for all 16 discussion groups was, “What is ‘quality of life’ for women?” It was clear from the responses of both women and men that the meaning is deeply embedded in cultural definitions of gender roles and in practical issues of coping with everyday reality. While it is difficult to give cross-cultural expression to the meaning of so complex a concept, the Shona words, *kugutsikana nehupenyu*, can best be translated in terms of satisfaction or contentment with one’s life and having aspirations consistent with the reality of one’s circumstances. Male and female participants tended to concur on this practical interpretation. Almost without exception, women emphasized that quality of life is the result of their own hard work and devotion to husbands and children, focusing on maintenance of the home, especially the performance of their roles as wives and mothers. Women also highlighted negotiation and conflict resolution between partners as an element of quality of life. Teamwork, each partner performing her or his expected role and resolving differences as they arise, is essential for quality of life, women said.

When asked to describe quality of life for women, men similarly emphasized contentment with one’s position in life, or striving for goals that are well within reach. They included in their definition the success of couples working as a team, resolving any discord that might obstruct the peaceful flow they believed to be essential to quality of life for women, as well as for themselves.

### **B**            *Quality of Life and Family Planning*

There seemed to be no question in the minds of either women or men that one important means to achieve a high quality of life is child spacing. The importance of couple communication and negotiation on desired family size emerged from both men’s and women’s focus groups. Both associated family planning with more equitable distribution of family resources, better health for all members of the family, adequate rest and leisure for the parents, and “peace of mind.” Family planning, women said, improves a woman’s quality of life by enabling her to “give adequate love to her children and her husband.” Men expressed similar opinions and added that family planning “protects women from aging” as a result of too-frequent births and too many children. In the words of one man, “Having ten or 11 children can damage a woman’s quality of life by making her feel like a human-making machine.”

When asked about possible negative consequences of family planning, women spoke of method failure, prolonged bleeding, and headaches, which they associated with oral contraception. Their strategies for coping with these problems were to discuss them with providers and seek the support of other women. Yet according to study participants, providers often do not take their concerns seriously. Women, they said, have many ideas for how family planning clinics could improve the quality of their lives, but providers do not listen. Their complaints were mainly about the cost of contraceptive methods, which they strongly believed should be subsidized by

government. Despite mention of some discomforting side effects, women did not appear inclined to discontinue contraception. In fact, they said emphatically that they could see nothing to be gained from not using family planning.

Men also spoke enthusiastically about the benefits of family planning and had few negative comments. However, some men pointed out that “honest discussion” between partners is a necessary link between family planning and quality of life. They wanted their wives to initiate family planning discussion and they wanted to be involved in contraceptive decisions. In their emphasis on male involvement, they seemed to want to guard against potential loss of control in this important family experience. In general, men emphasized the couple’s privacy, saying they did not want their wives to discuss family planning with other members of the family, and several complained that talk about family planning at “kitchen parties” (informal discussions among women) could have a “bad influence” on their wives.

### ***C Quality of Life in the Household Domain***

Women easily linked the concept of quality of life with household roles and responsibilities since by cultural definition, quality of life is inseparable from women’s roles of wife and mother. When asked how a woman can attain the quality of life she desires, women spoke of the “freedom to manage their domestic activities.” When probed by investigators, women gave such examples as “tidying up the house” and “helping children with homework.” There was little indication that women equated quality of life with personal growth or self-interest apart from practical needs to perform well in the roles prescribed for them by society.

Women believed husbands were instrumental in promoting women’s quality of life within the household if men brought money into the home, included their wives in decision-making on the maintenance of the home, and followed through on decisions made jointly by the couple. Women seemed to place greater emphasis on the instrumental quality of the conjugal relationship than its affective, or emotional, dimension, saying only that “good quality of life is a contented life shared by husband, wife, and children.”

Men similarly emphasized household management and marital harmony and, as did female participants, stressed that it is the role and responsibility of women to maintain quality of life for the family. Rural and peri-urban men, as well as women, distinguished between the home, defined as household and children, and the homestead, defined in terms as lands, outbuildings, farm implements, animals, and vehicles. This distinction between reproductive and productive environments was reflected in an equally sharp distinction between men’s and women’s roles – apparently unquestioned by participants in discussion groups. Men described women in such terms such as “pillars of the home,” acknowledging that women have “the hardest job in the family,” since they must “do all the household chores” and “look after their husbands and children.” Men also gave women responsibility for managing a household budget but indicated that, while women may initiate discussions, they expect women to seek their husbands’ approval before taking action.

As for their own contribution to household ideals, male participants generally accepted responsibility for support of the family, both economic and emotional. They saw their primary role as financial providers for the family. Some said that women should have access to their own bank accounts, but specifically for household emergencies when husbands were away. Some men volunteered that they help their wives with some household chores as a way to protect the overworked woman's health, but they quickly added that they would do so only as long as their wives did not reveal the men's domestic activity to others, especially his sisters. Indicative of men's recognition of the burden on married women was their frequent comment that, to enhance the quality of their lives, women should occasionally visit their own parents, where they would find respite from domestic duties that go with marriage.

Men spoke of women's need to trust their husbands not to spend the family income on beer and, in fact, women's right to see their husbands' paychecks in order to know what income to expect. Quality of life for women, they said, also depends on their getting out of the house occasionally. They added that men should socialize with their wives, or as one man said, "take their wives out for a walk after working in the fields and treat them to a nice cold Coca-Cola." Women, however, were more likely to define "leisure" in terms of time to complete household tasks without the interruptions and pressures of other demands.

#### ***D Women's Participation in the Work Force***

Discussion moderators raised the issue of women's entry into the work force and asked whether participants saw any connection between women working for pay and quality of life. Although few women in the sample were employed outside the home, there was general consensus that income generation—whether through formal sector employment or from sale of handicrafts or locally grown produce, was beneficial for family stability, harmony, and other attributes of good quality of women's lives. Women engaged in commercial farm work said they got satisfaction from contributing to family income, while urban women in the formal sector spoke more of the security it gave them to know they could earn a living. Other advantages to outside employment were the opportunity to interact with other women and greater visibility in the community.

Working women complained that men sometimes do not acknowledge the time and effort required to supplement the family income. They suggested that quality of life would be enhanced if men were not only to recognize their wives' financial contribution but also to provide the capital women need to start income-generating projects.

Men, on the other hand, expressed considerable ambivalence about the value of employment for women. On the one hand, men generally recognized that women today have many more opportunities to work outside the home than in the past. Furthermore, they agreed that with the rising cost of living, a woman who could add to the family income would promote well-being and hence quality of life, for herself and others in the family. They also pointed out that women's quality of life would be served if their earnings were commensurate with the effort they put into their work. However, some men expressed concern that women are putting paid employment ahead of their domestic duties. As one man put it: "Women have changed their values—putting more value on money than on caring for the family."

## ***E Women in the Community***

Women's participation in unpaid work outside the home evoked a similarly practical response. Referring to their civic responsibilities, women spoke of helping to keep the community clean, caring for the disabled, and participating in community projects, such as brickmaking and helping to build schools and churches. They seemed to accept this role as important for the quality of community life but without connecting it positively or negatively to their personal needs. For the most part, women did not refer to the inherent difficulty of balancing their three roles – reproduction, production, and community support. Men expressed their approval of women's community roles, citing community cohesion as the reason women should contribute to local development and the welfare of others. Male participants, however, volunteered that the importance of women's community role deserves some relief from other duties and that husbands owe it to their wives to "allow them time to participate in this work."

## ***F Women's Participation in Politics***

Focus group discussions also addressed political activity, another way for women potentially to influence development and advance their own interests. Many female participants said they vote in local and national elections, and some attend local political meetings and help organize political activities but primarily in roles subordinate to men. Women said they typically prepare and serve food at political gatherings, thus providing the support services that men needed to conduct the business of the meeting or rally. Women expressed willingness to serve political goals in this limited capacity, because they believed in the power of political action to bring peace and prosperity to the country and, hence, improve the quality of their lives. At the same time, however, they complained that in the present political environment there are few opportunities for women to take leadership roles on a par with men. Some women clearly felt ready for more active roles in political decision-making, but equal opportunity with men in politics seemed to them very remote. Male participants echoed the comments of women, adding that women are often the motivating force behind men's participation in political activity. They expressed support for women's greater involvement in local politics, because, as they said, helping to choose leaders who address women's problems and promote a higher standard of living ultimately works to benefit the whole family.

## **VII Discussion**

As interpreted by the women and men who participated in this study, good quality of life for women is viewed as a family ideal virtually synonymous with household harmony and the well-being of the family unit. From the women's point of view, satisfaction in life is inseparable from success as wives and mothers. From the logic of most male participants, the woman in her domestic role is the pivotal force on which the entire family's quality of life depends. In this critical position, women deserve the assistance of men, whose support is a means to, as well as an indicator of, women's quality of life. Men and women agree without reservation that a carefully planned family – having no more children than the couple can afford to care for and

educate – is a necessary if not sufficient, condition for good quality of life. Other determinants include economic security and a marital relationship marked by mutual respect and cooperation.

The message projected by this formula for quality of life is as important for what it does not say as for what it does. Women's practical interests to be the best wives and mothers they can are supported by women and men alike. But, women's strategic interests are less well served. Men speak positively of women in the work force but primarily for their contribution to household expenses. Women value the leisure time they associate with smaller families, because as the burden, of domestic work decreases, they feel able to give more of themselves to husbands and children. Men say women's education is important, because it helps them "to communicate better with their spouses." Men express a desire to help relieve women of their heavy domestic burden but primarily to enable them to do better what society expects of wives and mothers. To the extent that women's primary role is defined as reproductive – 'the pillars of the home' – the sexual division of labor will continue to reinforce women's subordination in other domains, limiting even those who have carefully planned their families from full participation in development.

Although for the most part, women responded to the discussion topics in a similarly practical vein, there are indications that they are beginning to think in terms of strategic needs for equity with men in the more public domains. For example, some of the women who linked quality of life with community participation spoke of the potential for greater visibility and opportunity to influence community development. Others expressed a longing for greater political leadership roles for women, recognizing that their contribution to policy decisions could have a positive influence on quality of life at all levels.

The women and men who participated in this study provided important insights into the great extent to which equal effort and mutual respect are valued components of the quality of their domestic lives. Less apparent was their concern for the need for gender equity in other domains. In the arenas of economics and politics, development planners need to place higher priority on increasing opportunities for women, as well as for men. This study suggests that as more women experience equity with men in the workplace, and take their place with male counterparts in local and national leadership, women will have increasing opportunities to realize the benefits of lower fertility in greater independence, a better quality of life, and their significant contribution to Zimbabwe's continued development.

## **VIII Recommendations**

- In a country where unemployment stands at 40 percent, jobs are difficult to come by for men and women. Government has mandated equal opportunity for women in hiring, but this rule needs to be monitored to ensure that as jobs become available, women and men with comparable qualifications have an equal chance of being hired.

- Women may continue to see themselves in traditional reproductive roles, in part because of limited opportunities to develop new skills, learn trades, or resume education interrupted by early childbearing. Resources such as these must be widely accessible and sufficient to prepare women to compete confidently with men in a competitive job market.
- Women in this study shared their wish that more husbands would provide the capital they need to launch income-generating projects in their communities. Women should not have to depend on family members for credit, but should have equal access to a variety of formal savings and loan programs that can help them gain independence through business ventures, from micro-enterprise to large-scale industry.
- Basic services are needed to help women meet their practical gender needs and at the same time take advantage of new opportunities in economic and political domains, for example reliable transportation for greater mobility, child care at the work place, and flexible work hours.
- As this study found, women believe that family planning service providers do not hear or take seriously, their opinions on service delivery. Providers and policymakers could collaborate with women's health advocates, locally and nationally, to develop more effective ways to incorporate perspectives of women and men in family planning and to explore, for example, ways that contraceptive methods could be made more accessible to families unable to afford the cost of care.
- Women would benefit from orientation to the political system at all levels. They need encouragement to participate more proactively in local government. They also need to know and interact with their elected representatives to Parliament, especially women parliamentarians who could serve as role models for women who wish to become more politically involved.
- Zimbabwe's well developed media networks could collaborate with women's advocacy groups to give more visibility to women in social, economic, and political roles demonstrating the benefits of gender equity in the development process.

## **IX Study Details**

Dr Jane Mutambirwa, a social anthropologist in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Zimbabwe, was the Principal Investigator for this study. Her assistants were Ms Verna Utete of the Harare Polytechnic Institute and Ms Patricia Maramba and Dr Chris Mutambirwa of the University of Zimbabwe. Dr Priscilla Ulin of Family Health International was the technical monitor. Findings reported here come from a preliminary analysis of the data. Additional analyses will be posted on FHI's web site as they become available. The research was supported by the Women's Studies Project of Family Health International, through a Cooperative

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