

**The Influences of Religion on Family Planning:
Excerpts from Midline M&E Focus Groups
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Diourbel

Women: Group 1

In your opinion, what does religion say about the comportment of a pregnant woman?

She must fulfill her duties and responsibilities as if she were not pregnant: do her daily prayers, respect her work, maintain good relations with her neighbors, look after her state of health.

What does religion say about birth spacing?

Religion does not encourage closely spaced pregnancies. I've experienced serious complications from the closely spaced pregnancies that I had. I suffered too much from them before giving birth and since then, I am no longer in good health. I often fall ill and I've been admitted to the hospital several times. I think that women must rest two to three years after giving birth before having another child.

Birth spacing allows us to care for our children and oversee their education. With closely spaced pregnancies, neither a woman nor her children will be healthy. Certainly, we are Muslims and want to propagate the Muslim community, but health comes first. I say yes to birth spacing in order to live better.

What do you think about a woman whose pregnancies are close together?

The woman will be very tired and her responsibilities will be considerable with respect to health, given the high cost of medications. As we age, it is too risky to have closely spaced pregnancies.

Even if your husband has the means to take responsibility for many children, I think that you must consider your state of health, as well as the education and well-being of the children.

What is the position of your religious leader on birth spacing?

Certain religious leaders maintain that birth spacing is not accepted by religion if you are in good health. However, if you suffer from complications after childbirth, religion authorizes you to space your pregnancies.

Should religious leaders become involved in promoting maternal health?

If the religious leader has the financial means, he can help. He can also convince the husband to follow the wife in her decision.

If the husband does not accept it, she can have her religious leader intervene to convince her husband to respect her decision out of concern for her well-being.

What do you think about a woman who insists on using family planning?

If it is for her well-being, she can use it. But above all, she must discuss it with her husband. I married very young, at the age of 14. When I gave birth to my first baby, the midwife was very concerned about my state of health. I had given birth without difficulty by the grace of God. The midwife asked my husband for me to use family planning for my well-being because I was too young. He accepted and since then, I plan my pregnancies by using the medications that we prescribed to me. Despite using the pill,

though, I had closely spaced pregnancies. I told myself it was the will of God and there was nothing I could do, but I was very fatigued during that pregnancy.

Do you talk to your husband about the number of children you'd like to have?

I did speak with my husband about it because I only have one child. It's him who brought up the subject. I hadn't had a party to celebrate our marriage, so he wanted to have another child so that he could honor me at the baptism ceremony, but God decided on it this way—we only had one child.

My husband wants children, but my health won't allow it at present. He even plans to take another wife to have children. He knows that having a child could be a risk for me, given my state of health.

Do women practice family planning in this area?

The women practice family planning. If you observe the amount of time between their pregnancies, you can clearly assume that they're using family planning. The men encourage it. The only problem is with the religious leaders.

How should religious leaders be involved in promoting birth spacing?

Certain religious leaders understand the importance of birth spacing. A lot of wives and daughters of religious leaders practice family planning. There must be meetings organized with religious leaders and fathers of families. The husbands should also be involved because they're the ones who most often reject family planning.

They reject family planning because they maintain that religion promotes births to propagate the Muslim community.

What are the strategies to implement so that religious leaders will become more engaged in promoting birth spacing?

The majority of religious leaders accept birth spacing.

Women: Group 2

In your opinion, what does religion say about pregnancies and maternal and child health?

Pregnancies are not easy. During a pregnancy, you often fall ill because of a poor diet or healthcare. Hospitals are expensive and a lot of religious leaders are against family planning.

I think that religion allows us to take precautions and to plan pregnancies with the consent of our husbands if our health is threatened. There are prayers for birth spacing and they're proven.

Do you discuss maternal and child health with your religious leaders?

I talk most often with religious leaders about maternal health. When you become pregnant, you solicit their prayers. They give us talismans and holy water. That's the spiritual side. But I believe that's not enough in terms of healthcare, which is why I think it's safer to go to the hospital and respect its care.

Religion accepts birth spacing, so I don't need to discuss it with the imam.

What should be the role of religious leaders in promoting maternal and child health?

They should encourage birth spacing and accept family planning. Certainly, religious leaders are against family planning, but they should be made aware so that they know this is for women's well-being. And with respect to us, we should fall in line behind religious leaders who encourage family planning.

What strategies should be implemented so that religious leaders can become involved in promoting maternal and child health?

Organizing meetings and raising awareness within communities on maternal health.

Religious leaders avoid participating on debates and maternal health and family planning for many reasons: firstly, Islam's position and secondly, the complications resulting from family planning, such as blood loss, sterility, etc.

What do you think about a woman who insists on using family planning?

It's because it's for her well-being or she's either had closely spaced pregnancies or complications after giving birth. And she wants to preserve her health.

She should speak to her husband above all else.

Can your choices on maternal and child health be influenced by your religious leaders?

We should talk with our religious leader before making a decision, but if it's about family planning, it's our responsibility to make the best decision.

We shouldn't talk to our religious leader about it. It's on the husband and wife to take responsibility in this area.

Men: Group 1

In your opinion, what is Islam's position on birth spacing?

Religion authorizes women to space or stop pregnancies if they risk losing their lives during childbirth, but it must be confirmed by a doctor with strong faith.

What do you think of closely spaced pregnancies?

Closely spaced pregnancies make the woman weak and the babies are often sick because they've gone through a brutal weaning. The woman will not be healthy either because she won't be able to care for herself and her children.

Bringing a child into the world each year is not good for a woman's health. Men also have part of the responsibility in closely spaced pregnancies. They should respect the period of breastfeeding.

What do religious leaders in your area think about birth spacing?

The imam brings maternal health into his Friday sermons. Women need to take precautions to space out their pregnancies for their well-being.

Women use family planning to space their pregnancies, but this practice has harmful consequences because a lot of women suffer from side effects after. Before using family planning, it's necessary to seek the husband's consent. A married woman must submit to her husband's decisions.

There are women who have complications after closely spaced pregnancies, and certain women don't face this difficulty. If a woman's health is threatened, Islam allows her to space her pregnancies to preserve her health, as well as her baby's. It is hard for the father of a polygamous family when all of his wives experience closely spaced pregnancies. Taking care of the family will be difficult.

What do you think of a woman who decides to use family planning without first getting her husband's authorization?

That woman disobeyed the obligations she had to her husband. Islam doesn't accept that.

Today, men criticize family planning because women can do it without the consent of their husband. And this encourages single women to use family planning because the husband's presence is not mandatory [to get a method]. That's what we disapprove of, and it should be reviewed.

What are the reasons that push a woman to use family planning without her husband's authorization?

If she has closely spaced pregnancies and her husband refuses to let her use family planning, in that case she can look to other precautionary methods, like having the imam or doctor intervene to make her husband see reason, explaining to him the risks that she could run through having closely spaced pregnancies.

Women must communicate with their husband for any decision. They often do it for their well-being or to be able to do as they please, which is why they do use family planning behind their husband's back.

Can religious leaders influence your decisions on maternal and child health within the family space?

My religious leaders can influence my decisions in all areas.

Religious leaders orient us on the recommendations of Islam. So all that they say, we must do.

If it is about family planning, I'll take complete responsibility in authorizing her to use it and the religious leader won't be informed of our decision.

Men: Group 2

What is Islam's view on pregnancies and maternal and child health?

It's the head of household who must take care of his wife and children's health. In this case, from the beginning of the pregnancy up to delivery, he must take care of all the medical expenses. Even if the woman has a salary, he's the one who must take care of it. However, if the husband doesn't have the income to take care of it and the wife does, she can support him.

Marriage is a recommendation of God. And to establish a family, we expect children to come out of the marriage. Religion asks men to care for their families well in all areas. Regarding pregnancies, religion allows the couple or family to take all appropriate measures to preserve the pregnancy and the health of the mother and child.

Do you know people who encountered complications during their pregnancy?

I have a relative who suffered a lot during her closely spaced pregnancies. She was suffering so much that she was taken to the hospital by ambulance. And for her well-being, the doctor asked her to stop becoming pregnant to save her life.

One woman often had miscarriages. I took her to the hospital. The doctors asked her to abstain from her husband for a year. And in respecting the doctors' orders, she finally had a child without difficulty.

I saw a case of that nature. Each time the woman gave birth, she was taken to the hospital. And in the case of her last delivery, she was admitted to the emergency service and to save her life, the doctors asked her to stop becoming pregnant. Since then, she can no longer have children.

I've seen two cases. They're two sisters. The oldest had four children, but she was operated on often. Finally, the doctors asked her to stop becoming pregnant.

What is your perspective on closely spaced pregnancies?

Closely spaced pregnancies are tough. It's not easy to raise two children at the same time. One has been through a rough weaning and the other was just born.

I think that religion asks for women to breastfeed their children for two years. Islam forbids closely spaced births where they would put the woman's life in danger. And the nephews of the Prophet, Ousseynou and Assane, can serve as an example of children born from closely spaced pregnancies. If that woman encounters complications from closely spaced pregnancies, after it's confirmed by a doctor with strong faith, she is permitted to space her pregnancies or follow the recommendations of the doctor.

My parents gave me secrets for birth spacing. It's an amulet that you put on your left foot and under the left side of the bed.

Do you discuss maternal and child health with your religious leaders?

Each day, we talk with religious leaders. Everything that I have said here I've pulled from the teachings and words of religious leaders.

We discuss with religious leaders, especially the imam. We call on him on all subjects: on our religion, household management, and our wives' pregnancies. We ask him about everything that touches our lives.

Imams must include themes around maternal health in Friday sermons so that communities better understand Islam's position on maternal and child health. They speak most often of religion.

Religious Leaders

Imam 1

Islam doesn't force anyone to marry. It orients us and teaches us our obligations as a couple in marriage. Starting a family comes down to five points. Religion helps the individual to protect his faith, his possessions, his life, his social relations, and his nature. Indeed, taking on the responsibility of starting a family is not easy because children are innocents. It's thus the responsibility of the father to protect the children and educate them. The children's well-being doesn't depend on the number, but rather on the conduct of the parents with regards to their children and society. It comes back to looking at how to plan pregnancies to be able to educate the children properly.

Islam teaches us how to live as a couple. What is important to know is that when you have a child, they need to be breastfed for two years. After that period, you can have another child. And we know that a pregnancy lasts nine months. The first child will be three years old at the most. So she spaced the pregnancies properly, but she still must care for her child for seven years before being separated from him if he's a boy. That's the period in which the child needs his mother's assistance and after that, he must be enrolled in school and go to the *daara* (Qur'anic school) or eventually receive other training.

Islam talks about birth spacing, but under another form. We're in an Islamic society and we therefore need to conform to the recommendations of Islam. If it's found that a woman could lose her life after delivery or have complications following closely spaced pregnancies, then in this case, Islam allows her to protect her life. This assessment must be done by a good faith doctor who believes in Islam. In this situation, you can take other precautions to protect your wife's life through medical means or methods accepted by religion. Above all, the couple must discuss it and agree on the method, while also avoiding the current methods used for family planning. I don't approve of family planning methods encouraged by the West.

The majority of Islamic schools of thought agree on this subject, which is birth spacing, known under different forms, like family planning.

Can birth spacing contribute to family and child welfare?

Naturally, good health contributes to family welfare. You can't do anything without good health. A healthy spirit in a healthy body. You must protect yourself and take precautions against anything that could diminish your health.

What strategies should be implemented so that religious leaders become more involved in promoting maternal health?

I think that first and foremost, it's important to instill confidence and have good relations with people. It is then that the communities will take ownership of the information shared with them. A lot of programs are rejected by the community because the preliminary studies that should have involved Islam in the process didn't include it. They're only looking for funding for these programs, but Islam doesn't interest them. It's the economic side that interests them and not religion. So we sometimes see diverging goals.

In your opinion, what should be role in the community's use of health services for family planning?

Family planning must be based on health and not on economics. God said that you are forbidden from eliminating your children because there is famine or eliminating your children because there will be famine. God maintains you and protects you.

There needs to be clarity in these programs so that they don't profit from people's socioeconomic difficulties to propose malevolent programs. Before people come in to help us, they need to ask us what our needs and concerns are.

Imam 2

We believe in our religious guide and we submit completely to the recommendations of the *Khalife général* of the Mourides.

I don't have knowledge of birth spacing. But I observe a lot of women adopting family planning. Anything that encourages well-being and associates Islam into the methods is a very good thing, but otherwise, we don't encourage it. The principles of Islam will never change, nor will the Qur'an. In any case, all that Islam encourages, we do.

I am not a doctor, but I know that in certain situations, Islam allows a woman to take precautions after her husband's authorization and if her illness is confirmed by a doctor who can attest that her health doesn't permit a pregnancy or delivery without difficulties. I know that during the month of Ramadan, pregnant women must refrain from fasting.

With respect to us, we submit to the recommendations of our religious guide. And as soon as he gives his position on this subject, we'll follow it. But I think that religion doesn't forbid it if it's for women's well-being. Regarding family planning for anti-natalist policies, we don't encourage that. We also don't support abortion because God said not to kill your neighbor. We're believers and we apply the teachings of Islam in all situations.

Is Islam's position on birth spacing not an obstacle to women in this area practicing family planning?

As far as I know, the women under my roof don't practice it. But I can confirm that a lot of women promote their well-being. That's why they can do it in secret—to be able to go about their activities and to attend to their work without major constraints.

Do you address subjects related to maternal health during important religious events?

We propose solutions to improve health. We warn them about certain illnesses and explain to them preventive methods through Islamic solutions. Today, a lot of illnesses are caused by infidelity. We must respect the doctors' recommendations, as well as those of Islam.

Today, women suffer from a lot of illnesses, like cancer and hypertension. And I don't think closely spaced pregnancies suit anyone or are good for women's health. If a married woman didn't experience complications after pregnancy, she is not required to space her pregnancies. But if she encounters difficulties in these situations, she's allowed to do it.

Imam 3

I base this simply on the teaching of Islam on health in general. My sources are the Qur'an and the words of the Prophet (PBUH). The Qur'an says that women must breastfeed their children for two years. It's a birth spacing policy that comes from Islam. Traditions allow women to go to their parents' homes to breastfeed their children for two years, which allows them to not have closely spaced pregnancies. The prophet said that during intimate relations between husband and wife, the husband has the possibility of ejaculating outside of his wife. This is also a way of avoiding closely spaced pregnancies. Today, a lot of NGOs promote birth spacing for the well-being of children and mothers, but also to make it easier for parents to care for their children. It's really difficult today to take care of lots of children while ensuring their health and education. And all of these aspects were raised in the Qur'an because God said that people's incomes are under his responsibility. So we must let children live. However, if a woman risks her life at delivery, Islam asks that she be protected.

The two-year breastfeeding period is a policy against closely spaced pregnancies. Some women undergo surgery during delivery to save their lives as well as their babies'. In this case, if doctors of strong faith note the women must often undergo an operation to deliver, they can ask her to stop or space her pregnancies to save her life and preserve her health.

In certain cases, if a woman is healthy, she must bear children and expand the Muslim community. And in other cases, if a woman isn't healthy, birth spacing, in respecting Islam's recommendations, could contribute to her well-being.

Do the women in your community use health services for birth spacing?

I see family planning from two angles: organizing births and stopping births. If it's for the former, it's a good thing. However, Islam doesn't accept abortion and birth limitation.

Do the women in your area practice family planning?

Certain women don't use it because their husbands are against family planning. The major obstacle is using it secretly. A lot of women use family planning without their husbands' authorization. Some do five-year family planning without their husbands knowing and women can go years without having a child. This way needs to change.

Islam must be included in the practice. Islam asks that women breastfeed their children for two years. We see women who wean their children abruptly to carry another child, which isn't good for the women's health or the children's. Children need to be strong. If it pleases God, we can get all the religious leaders together and find consensus on principles and approaches so that implementing birth spacing is effective.

Imam 4

My point of view on birth spacing is that Islam makes life easier for us. From the moment that it notices there are challenges, Islam proposes solutions to these concerns. Regarding birth spacing, Islam gets involved when there are health issues resulting from pregnancy or delivery. For example, if a woman

delivers a child and shortly thereafter becomes pregnant again and it could compromise her health, Islam asks that she protect her life in this case, using the methods that are in accordance with Islam's recommendations. I draw this from the hadiths of the Prophet (PBUH).

You know that Islam's vision is different from that of Westerners. They rely on socioeconomic situations to defend their positions. Islam refutes that position. God says in the Qur'an, "Safeguard your children because I am the only surety of their subsistence." So people shouldn't limit their pregnancies because their subsistence comes from God. That's why if there are health problems or a woman risks her life in having a child, Islam intervenes and asks her to space or even stop her pregnancies. It's like the obligation to fast. For those who are ill or don't have food to break fast, Islam allows them to abstain from fasting.

In your opinion, do women who use maternal health services take into account Islam's recommendation for the practice [of family planning]?

Naturally, if they're of good faith. There are a lot of them who call on me often on this so that they can understand Islam's position on the use of certain health services.

I've preached during Friday prayers about themes on these illnesses and also on maternal health. I also perform prayers to help along delivery and ease women's suffering during contractions.

Thiès

Women: Group 1

What does religion say about pregnancies and maternal health?

In terms of maternal health, religion authorizes us to stop or space pregnancies if we observe that there are health consequences after delivery. However, if there is no risk for the woman, she should continue to naturally have children.

In your opinion, why does religion accept birth spacing?

If our health allows us to be pregnant, nothing requires us to stop or space our pregnancies. However, if a woman is ill, she could put her life in danger by becoming pregnant. In that case, religion authorizes her to space out her pregnancies.

I experience complications after several closely spaced pregnancies. I nearly lost my life from them. So the doctors asked me to space or stop my pregnancies and I chose the latter by using a five-year family planning method. I did it to save my life and for my well-being. I know that Islam won't refuse me this favor, which is a door to getting my health back.

Have you or someone close to you experienced complications during pregnancy?

Someone close to me had complications. She had three pregnancies close together and with each one, she delivered twins. She enormously suffered from them. So for her well-being, the doctor asked her to use family planning. She chose five-year family planning.

My little sister miscarried twice. She's currently in the hospital because she's pregnant. The doctor asked her to use family planning after giving birth because her health won't support pregnancies close together. And I think she's going to follow the doctor's recommendations.

I suffer tremendously during my pregnancies and after delivery. Each time, I delivery through an operation (Cesarean section). That's why I opted to use family planning.

What do you think of closely spaced pregnancies?

With closely spaced pregnancies, you become sickly, as do your children. You won't have the strength or energy to take care of your husband and children.

I'm against closely spaced pregnancies because they bring illness and weakness. They prevent women from caring for their family and carrying on with their activities.

What does Islam say about maternal health in general?

In Islam, health is of the utmost importance. Maternal health is a priority. Women must take care of their health before anything else. You need to be healthy to manage your household and go about your activities.

What should be the role of religious leaders in promoting maternal health?

Religious leaders have an important role to play in this area. After my last delivery, I was seriously ill. The neighborhood imam came to visit me. At the time, he asked me, after my husband's agreement, to stop becoming pregnant or to space out my pregnancies. He was very sensitive to my situation, and I think that all imams react in the same way and fully play their part in their neighborhoods.

I think that religious leaders should not stand idly by if they observe a woman with health complications. They must support them and guide them for their well-being.

What is your perspective on a woman who insists on using family planning?

I think that a lot of woman use family planning for libertinism. There are a lot of women who have closely spaced pregnancies without complications and their children are healthy. I don't agree with family planning without the husband's prior authorization. If he refuses, she can look for other ways to convince him.

We use family planning to space out our pregnancies, not to have freedom to do our activities or for libertinism.

A lot of women use family planning for libertinism because with family planning, they don't risk becoming pregnant. They're free to come and go as they wish without the risk of becoming pregnant.

A woman who insists on using family planning because she has closely spaced pregnancies must first ask for her husband's authorization and explain to him the reasons for her decision.

I think that she's afraid of having difficulties during pregnancy and delivery because it's not easy to be pregnant or give birth.

If her husband refuses to let her use family planning when she knows that her life would be in danger after giving birth, she's obligated to do it for her well-being.

Do religious leaders influence your decision-making on maternal health?

For me, religious leaders can't influence my decisions on health. However, I'll make them understand the reasons for my decision, like I did with my husband. I'm the only one responsible for my well-being.

Religious leaders should only be concerned with religion and guiding us toward the right path. They shouldn't interfere in our private lives, like on our health decisions.

Religious leaders can't influence our decisions on maternal health. Health is priceless.

Religious leaders should concern themselves with religion and not interfere in people's lives. I had four operations and my doctor asked me to use family planning for four years. It's my life that was threatened. So in my case, I won't allow a religious leader to ask me to stop using family planning.

Religious leaders should influence our decision-making. Concerning the case I mentioned earlier, I took the initiative to get my neighbor to use family planning because I knew that her life was in danger and she wasn't in good health. In those kinds of situations, no one can influence my decision.

Religious leaders don't have the right to interfere in that area. Married life, that's the husband, the wife, and the children. Decisions about maternal health only concern the husband and wife.

Certain decisions only concern the husband and wife. Religious leaders have no say.

Can religious leaders influence your decisions on family planning or birth spacing?

They sometimes address themes that raise our awareness in those areas. We take their guidance under consideration. If I'm required to use family planning and my husband is opposed to it, a religious leader can make him see reason so that he backs my decision.

If my religious leader and my husband are against family planning, I won't take their opinion into account. I'll do what suits me with the sole goals of protecting my life and persevering my health, as well as my children's.

I take the religious leaders guidance into consideration if we share opinions. But if he's opposed and my husband is too, that won't prevent me from using family planning because my health takes priority

Do you talk to your husband about how many children you want?

My husband isn't difficult. He's really understanding. I had problems during delivery and the doctors asked me to stop becoming pregnant. My husband accepted it and encouraged me to do it. But in the end, my family refused. Since then, they mock me when I get pregnant. That practice, we leave it to Westerners.

I haven't done it because it's not part of our traditions.

What does your locality think about family planning?

Certain people are against family planning because they think that today's women want ease, which is why they space out their pregnancies. However, others are for family planning for health reasons.

It's a very good thing.

They think it's a really good thing if the women do it for health reasons because they often have complications during childbirth. I agree with that.

I think that those who use family planning are in good health. And we must should encourage them to do it.

Women: Group 2

What does religion say about maternal and child health?

Islam is against family planning in certain circumstances because the Prophet wanted the Muslim community to expand more and more in the world. But it's not forbidden to use family planning.

Our Muslim religion accepts women using family planning if they're not healthy enough to have children. But if a woman can have children without major complications, she's forbidden from using family planning. However, if closely spaced pregnancies will cause complications for a woman, in this case she's allowed to use family planning for her survival.

Have you or someone close to you experience complications during a pregnancy?

I had complications during my pregnancies. I suffer enormously during them because I don't eat well and have nausea all the time. That's why after my pregnancies, I often said that I needed to find a way to space them out. Because if I don't use family planning, I risk becoming pregnant every year. It will put my life in danger and my children will be malnourished and sickly. In those situations, religion allows me to use family planning.

What do you think of a woman who uses family planning behind her husband's back?

Before using family planning, you need to speak to your husband about it. And if he doesn't authorize you to use it, better to not do it.

I don't think there's anything wrong with that. I've used family planning for years without my husband knowing. I made that decision because I have seven children and I noticed that my health no longer allows me to carry a pregnancy. I previously discussed it with him and he authorized me to use it, but I neglected to use it. When I made the decision to use it, I didn't let him know because I know he wouldn't forbid me from doing it.

It's not good to use family planning behind your husband's back. Before making decisions like that, you need to discuss it with your husband. A lot of women use family planning because it suits them and it's their lives that are threatened by closely spaced pregnancies. And caring for children is their complete responsibility. The fathers aren't very involved with the care of the children, which is why women use family planning behind their husbands' back.

Men don't understand the suffering of women and pregnancies aren't easy. Neither is caring for children. That's why a lot of women, for their well-being, use family planning behind their husbands' backs.

Before making a decision on maternal and child health, do you discuss it with a religious leader?

The religious leader doesn't interfere in our private lives. His role is to teach religion. Above all, you need to discuss it with your husband.

The religious leader always sends us to our husbands. He asks us to follow the head of household's guidance since we're under the responsibility of our husbands.

Do the women in your village practice family planning?

Nearly all of the women have used family planning.

What do you think of family planning?

Family planning is a really good thing because it allows us to be in good health and be able to care for our children and husbands.

Family planning makes certain woman gain weight, and they sometimes suffer from respiratory palpitation. But once at the doctor, you can find something better. There are complications brought on by family planning, such as bleeding and nausea all the time. Certain women have breathing problems. Certainly, family planning is good, but it has consequences and doctors need to provide solutions to these problems.

Men: Group 1

In your opinion, what does religion say about maternal and child health?

I think that birth spacing is authorized by Islam when women are not healthy enough to produce many children. But today, a lot of women abuse this permission to use family planning with an eye to libertinism. However, if a woman's health doesn't allow her to carry a child, Islam allows her to practice family planning or birth spacing.

Religion accepts family planning, but under certain conditions. As a Muslim, if your wife is not healthy, you must abstain from her and understand. If a woman cannot become pregnant because she is unhealthy, her husband should understand it and give her the time she needs to take care of herself.

I recall the origins of acceptance for birth spacing in Islam, which allow us to marry two to four wives if we have the means or to just limit ourselves to one if we don't. This is a method of birth spacing. I'm against the family planning methods practiced today because there are serious consequences for women. For example, contraceptive medications can cause obesity and fibroids in women who take them, and there are also complications that arise from poor positioning of an IUD. Family planning also destroys our values through the use of condoms, which promote youth sexuality. And a lot of migrants' wives frequently see men without the risk of becoming pregnant, which is frequent. And a lot of single young people use family planning under the watch of complicit doctors.

It's the system we use today for birth spacing that I disapprove of. Birth spacing has always been practiced with natural methods. But it's the methods that are different now. I think procreation is the divine will. For example, people take precautions to not become pregnant, but they end up becoming pregnant and vice versa. That's why I prefer natural methods, but unfortunately, there's healthy policies imported from the West that are influencing our values. Since the awareness campaign on condom use and certain contraceptive approaches, our wives have begun experiencing complications.

What do you think of a married woman who insists on using family planning?

I think she doesn't respect her husband and wants to give in to libertinism. Before using family planning, she needs to have her husband's consent.

Communication needs to be promoted between the husband and wife before making such a decision.

Men: Group 2

Do religious leaders in your area address subjects like maternal health and closely spaced pregnancies?

On Sud FM Thiès, I heard a religious leader speak about maternal health. He was saying that it's recommended that we abstain from our wives after they give birth for a period of two months if they delivered a girl or three months if they delivered a boy. And also monitor her menstrual cycle and have relations outside of risk periods.

Certain religious leaders have contradictory opinions on the subject. They need to harmonize their positions.

What is the role of religious leaders in promoting maternal health and birth spacing?

They should host conferences, put out information as needed, and incorporate the information into Friday sermons, among other things. You hear this subject on the radio, but religious leaders need to spread information and clarify for us Islam's position on birth spacing and the methods to use. In any case, they don't fully play their role in promoting maternal health.

Only the imams participate in educating the population. But the information would be more suitable for the community if it were the *Khalifes généraux* or their spokesperson that shared messages on maternal and child health.

What do you think of a woman who uses family planning without the consent of her husband?

She doesn't respect her husband and religion. A woman should not use family planning without her husband's authorization because if he agrees and complications ensue, he'll be able to help her and take care of her. A wife must submit to her husband's decisions and communicate with him on all things.

What is your point of view on a woman who insists on using family planning?

I think that doctors should change the practice and insist on the presence of the husband before a woman uses family planning.

My wife often suffered from miscarriages and her doctor observed her complications. That's why I encourage her to practice family planning.

What do you think of a woman who uses family planning?

I've never seen it because women do it secretly.

Religious leaders

Imam 1

We follow Islam's precepts on this. Children are a gift from God. If a couple thinks that the wife risks having complications during delivery, it's important for her to discuss with her husband to make a decision. Islam forbids stopping what nature devises. You must not abort because abortion is barred by Islam. Men must marry at adulthood with girls of strong faith and who are healthy to reproduce. You should not do anything that could be harmful to your health. For example, if a woman wants to wean her child, she must discuss it with her husband. You must not stop having children while you're young and healthy. Islam forbids this type of practice.

Does your community take Islam's position into account on maternal and child health?

Today, people follow the Western way of life too much without really taking into account what Islam dictates.

How do you expect to spread this message in the community?

We have mosques, zawiyas, and large religious ceremonies. Everyone gets together at these places for various occasions. It's an important opportunity to pass on information on birth spacing. We pass information during Friday prayers, marriages, and baptisms.

Imam 2

How do you perceive birth spacing?

If a woman's health doesn't allow her to have children, she can plan her pregnancies. As an example, even for the five daily prayers, in extreme cases people do their prayers sitting. This is the same concept. If the doctor recommends that a woman stop becoming pregnant for her well-being, she should accept the doctor's decision.

A lot of women use family planning to the detriment of their husbands.

Do the women of the village use family planning?

There are positive changes in this area. Sometimes, you see significant age gaps between siblings although the parents don't want it. But such is the will of God.

Do you host conversations with the community on birth spacing?

We need to become more united and grasp the subject together before spreading messages within the community. [Religious leaders] need to be involved in information sharing on birth spacing.

Imam 3

If a woman risks her life after delivery, she's permitted to plan her pregnancies and even stop becoming pregnant after consultation with a doctor with good faith. However, if she is in good health, she has no reason to stop or even plan her pregnancies.

I think the main thing is giving children a good education and showing them the right path. And if a woman risks her life in childbirth, Islam allows her to stop becoming pregnant for her health and well-being. Living in peace and in good health is better than losing your living having children.

What are the different factors that can hinder your participation in promoting maternal health in your community?

We pass along information all the time, but people don't apply it to the letter. As religious leaders, we've fulfilled our responsibility, which is to put out the information. But in terms of application and approval, it comes down to the community itself.

If the doctor notices that a woman should space her pregnancies or stop them, you can reason with her husband in this case so that he yields to the doctor's decision and you can also ask the wife to respect her doctor's recommendations for her well-being. However, if she wants to practice family planning of her own volition without her husband agreeing, but she's in good health and wouldn't face any risks after delivery, we'd oppose her decision in that situation.

Imam 4

In all human actions, people must think about and submit to the words of the Lord. You first need the reasons for birth spacing. God created people in different ways with different bodies. Certain women can have a lot of children while others can't. If a woman risks her life during delivery, it's acceptable in this case for her to space her pregnancies. And if a mother doesn't have the means to provide for her children, she's also obligated to space her pregnancies. When you have a child, you have to provide for them in all ways: material, spiritual, and moral. During the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) time, birth spacing was practiced but under different forms than those of today. I believe that birth spacing is a really good thing because life is hard today and the means to support children are lacking. In Europe, they have the means to care for many children, but they prefer to limit the number of pregnancies to have time, which is not acceptable.

Does Islam accept this form of birth spacing?

Islam is against this form. If a couple has the means and the husband and wife are in good health, there's no reason for them to limit the number of children they have. You shouldn't flee from your responsibility to educate your children. Islam and medicine go hand in hand. You must not deprive life to those who would come into this world just for your own interests. If a woman is of childbearing age, she must not limit her pregnancies. The Prophet said that we must expand the Muslim community in the world. The Europeans who had birth limitation policies are now experiencing problems, like an aging population and lack of labor.

What arguments do you use to defend your position on birth spacing?

From a moral perspective, it's not acceptable to limit births just out of your desire to live in peace and for your own well-being. And if you bring children into the world that you aren't able to raise normally and provide a really good education for, the responsibility falls on you as the parents. It is easier to live well with three children than with fifteen. That's why some people choose to have fewer children—to live without difficulty. However, it becomes condemnable if you have the means to raise six children but prefer to limit yourself to two. The Qur'an is all that is logical and moral. He who has the means to have six children should not limit himself to one. It's not normal to have several wives and a lot of children without being able to provide for them.

Everyone wants to be able to access quality healthcare, but the means are often lacking. A lot of pregnant women benefit from my services in the area. I perform prayers that promote a smooth delivery and protect against miscarriages—and also talismans that protect against miscarriages.

Health is an obligation. In terms of gynecology, it's preferable that female gynecologists care for pregnant women. But when a woman isn't available, a man can do it.

What's that role of religious leaders in implementing a program for family welfare through birth spacing?

We need to integrate it into our discourse during collective prayers and make people understand the importance of birth spacing. Today, a lot of children are in the streets without an education or training and they turn to bad practices. Our morals tell us that it's more just to not bring children of this nature into the world. If you know that you can't care for a child and provide him with a good education, better to not have a child. We all know that it's not pleasant to bring a criminal into the world.

Can you promote birth spacing?

Of course, we can do it and give supporting examples to convince couples to space out their pregnancies and even stop becoming pregnancies if they're harmful to the wife's health. If you are irresponsible in taking care of your children, you're not permitted to have them. You know that abortion is not permitted in Islam.

Children have incalculable value, which is why we need to give the utmost priority to their lives and well-being. Parents are responsible for their future, here on earth and in the afterlife. It's not good to bring children into the world that you aren't able to educate or provide for and who will later be evils for society. In the time of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), a lot of his companions would do spiritual retreats to not risk bring children into the world who would harmful to society and whom they did not have the time to educate to care for. And the Prophet (PBUH) witnessed the decisions of his companions and accepted it. However, spacing is only permitted under certain conditions. You must not use fallacious arguments for birth spacing.

Kédougou

Women: Group 1

What does religion say about birth spacing?

I don't know what religion says about family planning.

Today, there are those who are who are against family planning. But I think it's a good thing. Pregnancies that are close together have health consequences for women and children. Birth spacing is advantageous on the socioeconomic side.

Does religion accept family planning?

Religion accepts the practice for certain people. And others criticize it. If a woman is able to abstain from her husband after childbirth, she doesn't have to use family planning. However, she could use family planning to space out her pregnancies.

First, there needs to be a consensus between the husband and wife. But in any case, religion doesn't accept it.

What should religious leaders do to promote birth spacing in the community?

They should discuss it with us since we don't attend Friday prayers.

What do you think about a woman who insists on using family planning?

It's because she's often had closely spaced pregnancies and she's thinking about her well-being.

Is it acceptable for a woman to insist on using family planning without discussing it with anybody?

There are women who do it in secret without their husband's consent.

Certain women discuss it with their husbands before using it. They use it for their well-being and to improve their socioeconomic situation. However, others use it without their husband's authorization and most often face problems in their marriage.

*Women: Group 2***What do you think religion says about pregnancy and maternal and child health?**

It's difficult to have closely spaced pregnancies. Islam asks women to space their pregnancies. Closely spaced pregnancies bring about health complications for women, and we need to avoid certain practices. After childbirth, we're permitted to breastfeed our babies for a period of two years. Islam allows this.

Do you know someone who had complications during a pregnancy?

I had complications during my pregnancy. I often had stomachaches and after delivering, I was finally admitted to the hospital for care.

I experienced complications at childbirth because the baby was stillborn.

What's your perspective on closely spaced pregnancies?

It's a bad thing and the woman could lose her life from it. Women age quickly and become weaker and weaker.

I didn't use family planning, but I breastfeed my baby for two years before being with my husband, even if he doesn't accept it.

How should religious leaders be involved in promoting maternal and child health?

They should hold meetings and share their knowledge on maternal and child health.

What do you think about a woman who insists on using family planning?

It's because she's tired.

It's because she's often faced with closely spaced pregnancies and her health can no longer support the pregnancies. Above all, she must discuss with her husband and explain the reasons for her decision to him.

Do you involve religious leaders in your decisions on birth spacing, or does that concern that couple?

You should involve the imam. Even if the imam refuses, you should defer to your decision. Even if the imam refuses after learning of the decision, couples can take responsibility and use family planning if it's in their interest, for their well-being as well as their children's.

Men: Group 1

What do you think religion says about pregnancies and maternal and child health?

It's good to space pregnancies because women lose a lot of blood during childbirth. If a woman has closely spaced pregnancies, she risks anemia that could cost her her life.

A wife must first and foremost obey her husband when she is pregnant. A husband must also take care of his pregnant wife by providing for her and looking after her. A wife must be faithful to her husband for her well-being. Birth spacing contributes to children's welfare, but also helps in terms of health and economics. A woman who spaces her pregnancies will be healthier than a woman who has closely spaced pregnancies.

Birth spacing contributes to an individual's development and also to economic development because if you have fewer children, it will be easier to care for them and provide an education.

What does religion say about birth spacing?

Islam doesn't accept us bringing children into the world that we can't care for. In this case, it accepts birth spacing if you don't have the means to educate them and care for them.

God says in the Qur'an: "Your sons, your wives, and your belongings are sins for you, but you don't know it." It's easy to have a child, but it's not easy to oversee their education and their care. If your wife doesn't respect your parents or your family, then tell yourself you don't have a wife. And if you spend your belongings on trivial pursuits, it will lead you to Hell. Each father of a family is a shepherd. And so if you provide them with a good education, your conscience will be clear. However, if they lack a good education, you will be responsible for their faults.

What is the position of religious leaders on birth spacing and family planning?

We used to give women three years to breastfeed and to take charge of their own health. Men had their own bedrooms and often abstained from their wives for their own good, as well as their wives'.

Have you seen or known women who have had complications with their pregnancies?

I've seen a lot of cases because I work in a community health structure. Women suffer from anemia and certain illnesses.

Even my own wife was operated on during her last delivery and it was hard for her to recover.

What should be done so that religious leaders communication with the population on birth spacing?

We need to stress education. If religious leaders refuse to do this, we can organize radio and TV shows because religious leaders don't have time. But if they accept educating the population, it would be a really good thing.

What do you think of a married woman who makes a firm decision to practice family planning?

It's because something's not right in her body. That's why she took the initiative to space out her pregnancies. She explained to her husband the reasons for her decision and he refused. In this case, for

her well-being, she made the firm decision to practice family planning. Women have rights within the marriage, just as husbands do.

Can religious leaders influence your decisions on maternal and child health?

Religious leaders have a big influence on our decisions. They're a part of all our decisions.

Men: Group 2

What do you think religion says on pregnancies and maternal and child health?

You need to protect her [your wife] and take her to the hospital, take care of the baby, and motivate her [your wife] to go to her doctor's appointments.

You should do everything to protect your wife and the child she's carrying. When she gives birth, you provide for the child and baptize him, giving him a name, and raise him according to Islamic principles.

Has your wife or someone close to you experienced complications during pregnancy?

My wives often had complications during pregnancy. They miscarried twice. After, the doctors asked me to have them stop giving birth to save their lives.

What do you think of closely spaced pregnancies?

Closely spaced pregnancies are not good. Children need to have time to breastfeed up to two years. It would be difficult to take care of your children with closely spaced pregnancies. Better to space pregnancies in asking your wife to use family planning under a midwife of solid faith. After a defined period of time, she can stop using family planning to have another child.

It's not good to have closely spaced pregnancies. It's tiring to take care of the mother, the baby, and the baby she's pregnant with. It's not easy to manage all that. You need to take precautions by taking your wife to the hospital so she can use family planning.

Has the imam already addressed maternal health and reproductive health in your area?

All that Islam says on maternal and child health, he has told us. He educates us during prayers, baptisms, and marriages.

What should the imam's role be in assisting the community with promoting maternal and child health?

He should educate the community on maternal health.

What do you think of a woman who gets up one day and decides to practice family planning or birth spacing?

I would accompany her in doing it because birth spacing contributes to development.

How does your community perceive a woman who practices birth spacing?

In my opinion, there are more who are for than who are against.

I'm for birth spacing.

Religious leaders

Imam 1

According to you, what does Islam say about birth spacing?

The cycle of pregnancy is as follows: in the first 40 days, he becomes water; in the following 40 days, blood; and finally, he becomes flesh. In that instant, God breathes life in and your destiny is sealed. When children are born, women must breastfeed them for two years before becoming pregnant again.

Does religion authorize birth spacing, family planning?

Religion does not accept it.

What do you base your remarks on family planning on?

I base it on the Qur'an, which says that women must breastfeed their children for two years. That's the only method Islam accepts for birth spacing. There are prayers for birth spacing, but those are traditional practices that Islam doesn't accept.

Do the women of your village and the surrounding areas take Islam into account on birth spacing?

The women practice family planning without taking into consideration the recommendations of Islam.

On what occasions do you address maternal and child health with your community?

At Friday prayers, baptisms, conferences, and the Korité and Tabaski holidays.

What should be the imam's role in promoting maternal and child health?

Spacing out pregnancies while taking Islam's recommendations into account is not forbidden by religion, and Islam also doesn't encourage closely spaced pregnancies. I don't encourage the methods used today, which are family planning.

Imam 2

What is the imam's role in terms of socioeconomics with respect to the community?

Birth spacing is common in communities. And God said, "I am the surety of your subsistence and that of your children, as numerous as they are." God designed man in a well-defined cycle: for 40 days, he is water; for 40 days, blood; and for 40 days, flesh. Closely spaced pregnancies risk weakening women and affecting their health. And with the fragility of the female reproductive system, it's not good to have closely spaced pregnancies, which is the reason religion accepts birth spacing. And that's why religion asks women to breastfeed their children for two years.

My fourth wife experienced serious complications during delivery and the doctors asked me to have her stop her pregnancies to save her life. I accepted because Islam promotes our well-being.

Does birth spacing contribute to the well-being of the community?

Certainly, because women and their children will be healthy. And women will have milk to breastfeed their children. It's not good to be with child and breastfeeding another child. That's what leads to child malnutrition.

A lot of women in the village use family planning. The thing that's forbidden is abortion. But family planning isn't forbidden by religion.

Imam 3

What is the role of the imam in the community?

Islam asks men to abstain from their wives for 24 months after childbirth for the women to breastfeed their children. The children will then be strong and healthy. However, if women are healthy after two years of breastfeeding, they can have another child. In the old days, men abstained from their wives for a long period. To measure the period of their abstinence, they cut a tree and waited until the tree grew to have intimate relations with their wives. But today, people can't even wait 40 days after women deliver. For 40 days after delivery, women aren't clean, so you shouldn't approach her. I think it's better to wait two years before being with your wife again.

Does birth spacing contribute to women and children's well-being?

If it's with the husband's consent, birth spacing is a very good thing for the woman's well-being. If a woman becomes pregnant a year after giving birth, I think that's not good for her health or the baby's.

Do women in this neighborhood believe that religion supports birth spacing?

There are those who believe that because you see women who go two to three years without a pregnancy. So I can say that they respect the period of breastfeeding.

Do women in this area space out their pregnancies?

A lot of women do. The poor area is different than the rich area. The latter can have children as they wish.

However, if your wife delivers many times and they observe that she risks her life after another delivery, it is reasonable to accept that she stops having children. I've been through these situations with my wife, and I accepted it. Ever since, she's stopped becoming pregnant. I only have two children with her. People need to think first about their well-being.

There needs to be support and understanding in a marriage. We need meetings to be organized on this topic. There need to be meetings organized on this topic. Today, people worry more about their economic situations than health, and we can do nothing without health. We need to organize meetings and for this, we need motivation for people. Our religious guide and the *Khalifes généraux* should be involved in the process.

Imam 4

In my opinion, I think that birth spacing is to ease the suffering of women. I base this on morals to say that Islam accepts birth spacing.

Positions differ because each person speaks from his or her own knowledge. We must avoid controversy so as to not mislead the community. For some people, family planning is a taboo subject, which is why they're ashamed to discuss it with their spouses. You should practice birth spacing when it's necessary. If a woman has closely spaced pregnancies, there is no one to help her with her tasks, she doesn't have the means to care for her children, and her health is at risk, religion authorizes a couple to space their pregnancies in this case.

There cannot be development if people are bringing children into the world that they are not able to care for and whose education and health they can't ensure. That's where the need for birth spacing comes from—to resolve these things.

Do the women in your neighborhood take Islam into account in birth spacing?

A lot of women don't ask religious leaders if family planning is permitted and in which situations it's allowed. They use family planning on their own and I'm not sure if at health centers, they're required to come with their husbands before using family planning.

What strategies should religious leaders implement to improve and promote maternal health?

There needs to be a strong consensus by all religious leaders and Islam needs to be part of the process for the practice of birth spacing.

In the marriage, one of them might say, “I don’t have time, so I don’t want more children.” Religion won’t accept family planning for this. Women should avoid having children whose education isn’t guaranteed. These points aside, I don’t see a position in which someone can refuse his spouse’s health. We’re not asking people to stop producing, but to produce in adequate conditions.

Priest 1

The Church recommends birth spacing and suggests the use of natural methods.

A couple came for a consultation with me and said they had used the IUD. This method had proven ineffective because the woman became pregnant. We think that even scientific methods are not 100 percent effective. I advise them to use natural methods, such as those recommended by the Church.

Birth spacing is fundamental because women lose a lot of blood during childbirth. Women must rest their body after a delivery.

What are the implications for health issues?

On questions of reproductive health and family planning, yes, we can be involved if someone helps us to strengthen our capacity to communicate about birth spacing because the Church promotes natural birth spacing. Even though there are those who try to change words.

Established in July 2014, the Cadre des Religieux pour la Santé et le Développement (CRSD) is an interfaith association that brings together the different religious families, Islamic associations, and the Catholic and Lutheran churches of Senegal. Since 2014, CRSD has worked with Senegal’s Ministry of Health and Social Action to improve maternal and child health throughout the country. CRSD aims to encourage dialogue and cooperation among Senegal’s religious communities to advance development; improve maternal and child health; protect and support vulnerable populations; and promote social cohesion and peace.

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