Breaking taboos about gender and health in Honduras

Cultural barriers and taboos make it difficult for women to seek medical attention during pregnancy and childbirth in Honduras. Encouraging men to participate in the health of their family has improved women's access to reproductive and maternal health care.

Barriers to health care
The lack of health services and information in rural and remote areas of Honduras severely limit women’s access to healthcare. Sexual and reproductive health is faced with taboos and cultural barriers which minimize the likelihood that women will seek medical attention during pregnancy and childbirth.

Reina Pineda tells: “When I found out that I was pregnant with my seventh child, I was first dismissed by my employees. Moreover I found out that I was HIV positive. My family, parents and siblings chose to turn their back on me. They didn’t wish to support me. And the father of the child didn’t want to take any responsibility”.

FACTS ABOUT HEALTH IN HONDURAS

- Neonatal mortality accounts for 61% of infant mortality
- Gestational hypertension and postpartum haemorrhage are frequent causes of in-hospital maternal mortality
- Only one physician is looking after more than 30,000 people
One of the major challenges is to convince men to be more involved in the health of their family. The culture of Honduras assigns women the responsibility of caring for their family’s health but gives them no power to make decisions which are instead left to the male family member.

**Red Cross action**

The Honduran Red Cross project focuses on promoting safe pregnancies and child health thereby preventing maternal and child mortality in the remote districts of Copán and Santa Bárbara.

One of the key strategies is to use male volunteers and encourage men to participate during pregnancy, childbirth and child care. In collaboration with the only physician in the district and local health committees, Red Cross reaches out to men visiting the health clinic with their wife, taking this opportunity to highlight the importance of the father’s involvement in family health.

Moreover midwifes are offered training to improve their skills together with community health workers and local birth attendants who assist pregnant women in remote districts. The focus of the training is on ante- and postnatal care and detecting danger signs during pregnancy and postpartum and timely referrals.

“After all my relatives chose to turn their back of me due to the pregnancy and HIV status, the local midwife and volunteers of Honduran Red Cross were my only safety net. They looked after me throughout my pregnancy and are still here for me, providing psycho-social and emotional support. They informed the village in a very tactful and respectful manner about my HIV status and because of their intervention and care, the village embraced me and supported me in my situation” tells Reina.

**Achievements**

The Red Cross project has trained almost 4,000 community health workers. The scale-up of community health workers with midwife training has led to 92% of pregnant women attending four antenatal care visits.

Districts of Copán and Santa Bárbara have seen an increase in the number of men accompanying their wives to their monthly prenatal check-ups, to the birth of their babies and to the monthly weighing of their babies.

Institutional deliveries have increased by approximately 30% since 2006. In 2013, more than 90% of the women delivered in health centers with the help of doctors while only 9% delivered at home, mostly under the supervision of a trained birth attendant.

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**KEY ACTIONS FOR SUCCESS**

- Encouraging men to participate during pregnancy, childbirth and child care
- Training health workers and local birth attendants to assist pregnant women in remote districts
- Establishing health committees to be a link between the formal health care system and communities