

Traditional contraception in modern times: a methodological enquiry in measurement of traditional methods of contraceptive use in four African countries

Background/Introduction

Over the last couple of decades, the continued focus on fertility reduction and contraceptive uptake in global family planning has been evident in the way that success is defined and goals are measured in the field (Madise, 2019). Many studies and family planning programmes rely on secondary research data for estimating contraceptive use rates and associated unmet need for contraception. However, most of the research, policy and advocacy effort has been invested in modern methods of contraception with the exclusion of traditional methods of contraception, resulting in a dearth of knowledge about women who use traditional methods of contraception to delay or prevent pregnancy, and their motivations to use these methods, which are widely cited as less effective (Tsui et al., 2017).

We posit that traditional contraceptive method users need to be uniquely recognized in the family planning discourse due to the fact that their needs may be characteristically different from those of modern users as well as non-users of contraception. Recent studies in parts of sub-Saharan Africa, for example, have found that highly educated women and women who live in urban areas are more likely to use traditional methods of contraception than their less educated or rural counterparts (Basu, 2005; Johnson-Hanks, 2002; Ram et al., 2014). Thus, lumping women from different contexts together in addressing women's contraceptive needs may be problematic, especially for family planning policies and programs that seek to reduce unmet need for family planning. Questions that arise include whether users of traditional methods are using them as they transition to modern methods, or if they are a replacement for modern methods because of fears of side effects or other structural or ideological barriers. Currently, we are hampered by survey instruments focused on gathering information on a single method only in capturing a woman's current use of contraception and insufficient research devoted to understanding the motivations for traditional methods use, and the likely bias in estimates resulting from standard family planning survey designs. Our paper uses data from a mixed-method study in four sub-Saharan African countries, to investigate the understanding and use dynamics of traditional methods of contraception as well as women's motivations for using these methods.

Theoretical focus

We recognize that measuring contraceptive use dynamics is methodologically contested due to considerable reporting bias that occurs. The most widely used approach is the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS)-style survey which applies a questionnaire to investigate current contraceptive use, reasons for use/non-use and intentions to use (ICF, n.d.). Ultimately, only one method which is mentioned by a woman, the most effective method she uses currently, gets reported. Several issues with this approach have been flagged especially the potential risk that the reported method in surveys becomes a very inadequate proxy or representation of women's contraceptive use. This is because this measure leads to

missing out on such dynamics as women's concurrent use of multiple methods (method mixing), their choice of methods and associations with the type of sexual partner(s) they are involved with both in marital and non-marital unions, decision-making and power dynamics on choice and use, and what motivates their use or non-use of traditional contraceptives.

From an extensive and systematic review of the literature on traditional methods of contraception, we find that the very definition of what constitutes a traditional method is largely contested (Rossier & Corker, 2017; Tsui et al., 2017). By employing a mixed methods approach, our study will shed more insight into users' own definition of what a traditional method is, given that there is no single optimal definition for traditional contraceptive methods and that this will vary from one location to another. We also utilize a multi-country approach in this study with the aim of understanding traditional contraceptive use in different contexts in four selected countries- Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), representing West, Central and East Africa. We believe the mix of countries provides a wide range of social and cultural settings, contraceptive use profiles and fertility regimes which will enhance our nuanced understanding of traditional contraceptive use in diverse contexts.

It is in light of these arguments that we justify this current pilot study with a methodological focus; we posit that a new approach for estimating traditional contraceptive use prevalence (tCPR) will offer a stronger alternative to what is currently being used.

Specifically, we seek to know:

- What are women's motivations for the use of traditional methods?
- How does asking questions in different ways give more in-depth information about traditional methods of contraceptive use either used on their own or in combination with modern methods?
- How much can we find out about how different methods (traditional and modern) are used with multiple partners by seeking in-depth information about partnerships and contraceptive use?

Our study will thus advance the understanding of the true dynamics of traditional methods of contraception in the four African countries as well as women's motivations for using these methods.

Methods

The study employs a mix of quantitative and qualitative approaches. These approaches will span:

- i) testing modifications to survey instruments for collecting data on contraceptive use including traditional methods to improve existing survey methodology and refine questions to collect data on traditional methods.
- ii) using mixed-methods techniques to gather data on the motivations, patterns and profiles of women who use traditional contraceptive methods to improve estimates of the use of traditional methods of contraception among women.

Qualitative research

At the initial phase, qualitative interviews will be conducted aimed at getting a sense of what needs probing in family planning surveys which include traditional methods for better outcomes. Here, we are conducting focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews with women, as well as key informant interviews with community leaders, women's leaders, women users of family planning being interviewed as "experts /key informants", family planning providers and health officials. There will be 12 FGDs in total per country, each with 8-10 participants in each discussion.

Quantitative research

Once we have analyzed the qualitative data and incorporated the refinements in wording for traditional methods in local dialects as well as a list of traditional methods specific and indigenous to the different country contexts, the quantitative instrument will be fine-tuned and customized for each country on these parameters. There are 4 versions of the survey instrument for the piloting; We will interview about 240 women in each country for the quantitative survey, culminating in a total of 960 women in total.

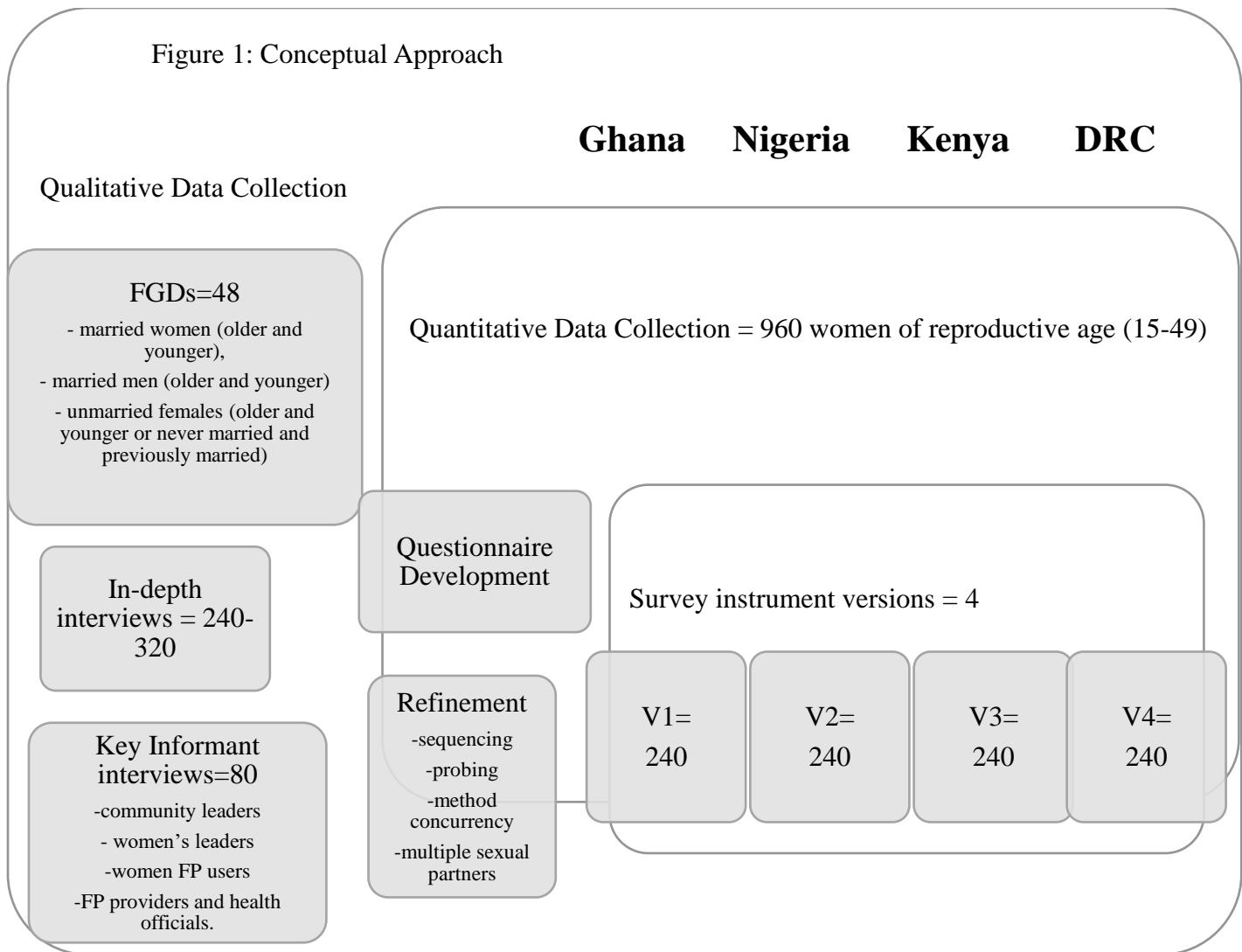
In all four countries, qualitative research began in May 2021 and the quantitative component of the study will begin in June 2021. By the end of July 2021, we will have completed data collection and began analyses of our data. Figure 1 shows the conceptual approach to the field study, the countries, and the breakdown of our samples.

Expected outcomes

In our full paper, we will present our results on the motivations for the use of traditional methods of contraception as elucidated by males and females in the four country contexts. This will give insight about how high and lower fertility and contraceptive use settings understand and approach traditional methods use. We will also present results on how various patterns of questioning in surveys, particularly in changing question sequencing or applying probes, result in differing estimates of traditional and modern contraceptive use, concurrency of method-use and dynamics of method-use with different kinds of sexual partners and in both single and multiple partnership relationships. Ultimately, we expect, from our study to provide information that will lead to:

- o Improving survey methodology and refining questions in family planning instruments
- o Improving estimates of the use of traditional methods of contraception among women
- o Getting a sense of what needs probing in FP surveys including traditional methods for better outcomes
- o Better inform measures of universal access to family planning.

Figure 1: Conceptual Approach



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