

# Gaps & Opportunities in Counseling Couples

A systematic review of couples counseling interventions in reproductive health



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## BACKGROUND

Couple counseling interventions are identified as more effective than those targeting a single partner. (Becker, 1996)

Couple counseling interventions vary widely in approach and definition of counseling. "Couples-based" approaches target and intervene with the couple together, while "couples-focused" primarily involves individual-based activities and services separately to partners (Hart, Ross and Silva, 2006)

No single, accepted definition of couples counseling in FP identified in the literature. This review defined couples counseling loosely as:

**"an intentional approach to engage couples in shared understanding and joint decision-making to meet their overall reproductive health goals"**

## OBJECTIVE

Identify and synthesize couples counseling interventions with an emphasis on reproductive health (RH) outcomes, in order to facilitate future operationalization and guideline development in couples counseling for the family planning (FP) field.

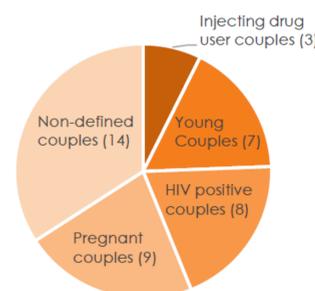
## LITERATURE REVIEW METHODOLOGY

- ✓ Conducted a systematic review of peer-reviewed publications and grey literature from 1990 to 2016
- ✓ Utilized several search engines to identify 5,321 publications
- ✓ Eligible documents met the following criteria:
  - Intervened with both members of the couple pair
  - Described a systematic evaluation design (i.e.: experimental, quasi-experimental, or non-experimental)
  - Reported at least one effective RH primary or secondary outcome (FP, HIV/AIDS, maternal and child health [MCH] and/or; abortion and post-abortion care)
- ✓ **Resulted in 41 couples counseling documents/projects reviewed**

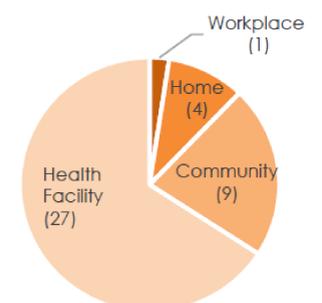
## RESULTS

- ✓ The documents/projects reviewed came from high, middle, to low-income countries
- ✓ **Addressed a range of reproductive health topics:**
  - 23 focused on HIV,
  - 14 focused on family planning
  - 2 focused on maternal child health
  - 2 focused on (post)abortion care.
- ✓ **The majority of interventions were conducted in health facilities.**
- ✓ Others were located in:
  - Community outreach activities
  - Home-based counseling
  - Workplace engagement

### Description of intervention couples in documentation



### Couple Counseling Intervention Setting



In general, improved FP outcomes as a result of couples counseling include:

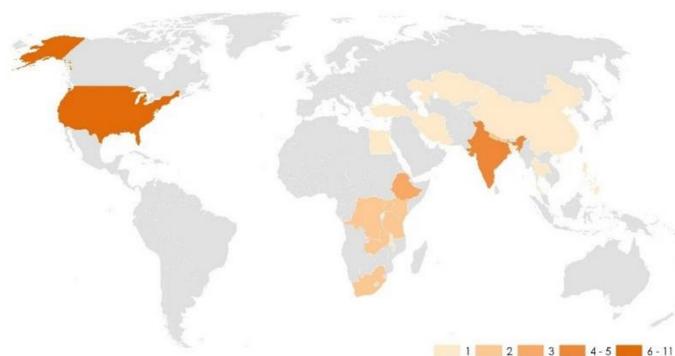
**1. IMPROVED METHOD USE**  
Increased adoption and continuation of family planning methods (including post-partum), in addition to increased birth spacing. Reduced pregnancy incidence was also reported by one of the papers (Wall et al. 2013)

**2. IMPROVED COUPLE COMMUNICATION AND PARTNER SUPPORT FOR FP**  
Increased couple communication about FP, partner support for FP, improved decision-making about FP, and positive attitudes toward FP methods

**3. IMPROVED KNOWLEDGE ABOUT FERTILITY AND FP**  
Increased knowledge about fertility, FP, pregnancy, and condom use

**4. INCREASED MALE OUTREACH AND PARTICIPATION IN COUNSELING SERVICES**  
Increased uptake of couples counseling services and men accompanying women to post-partum and general health clinic visits

### Continental regions of couples counseling interventions (n=41)



## DISCUSSION

The results of this review highlight three programmatic implications:

1. A diversity of couples counseling definitions and approaches exists, and operationalizing a common definition and framework is necessary to progress this area of service delivery.
2. Effective approaches vary greatly in the intensity and depth in which they addressed gender and power dynamics, couple communication, and intimacy. Identifying most effective elements for addressing gender should be a next step.
3. Few of the identified documents/projects describe outreach strategies to increase men's participation in counseling services. Much more evidence is needed, particularly related to the capacity development of counselors/promoters and how the local FP context influences decisions related to selecting an approach.