



Fertility Awareness
for Community
Transformation



WALAN: Wake ki Lago Nywal ("To Be Proud with Family Planning")

LOCATION

Northern Uganda: Amuru, Nwoya, and Gulu Districts

TIME PERIOD

September 2014 – June 2017

GOAL

WALAN is a community-based group learning approach that aims to increase fertility awareness, encourage family planning use and expand access to Fertility Awareness Methods (FAM) primarily among women, men, and couples 15-35 years old who learn about these topics in a group setting from non-health personnel.

DONOR

U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)

IMPLEMENTERS

- Institute for Reproductive Health, Georgetown University
- Save the Children
- District Community Development Office (CDO), Nwoya and Gulu
- Members of the Youth Initiative for Employment & Sustainable Livelihoods Development (YIELD)
- WALAN Technical Advisory Group

Women's ability to choose the number, timing, and spacing of her pregnancies is a matter of human rights. Unfortunately, women often lack the means, access, and agency to take control of their fertility throughout the course of their lives.

In Uganda, despite investments in sexual and reproductive health over the last decade, high rates of unmet need for family planning remain. Especially in remote or low-resource settings, access to information is lacking, health systems are often overburdened, and family planning counseling may be out of reach.

Specifically in the Northern Region of Uganda, about 23% of currently married women are using a modern family planning method, while close to 43% have an unmet need for family planning. Among women not using contraception, over 70% did not discuss family planning either with a community health worker or at a health facility in the past year (Uganda Bureau of Statistics & ICF International Inc. 2012). Findings from the FACT Project formative research in this region indicate general acceptance of family planning, in light of post-conflict economic conditions. However, male opposition to modern family planning and cultural values that promote large families undermine family planning use.

Offering fertility awareness methods (FAM) in a group setting can help increase acceptance of family planning and fill a critical gap in underserved populations: meeting women's needs for methods that are easy to teach and learn, address concerns about side effects, and ultimately expand family planning access and choice.

An emerging body of evidence shows that group learning—a community-based approach *outside* the health system—can be effective in delivering vital health information and encouraging positive behavior change.



What is WALAN?

WALAN is a community-based group learning approach implemented through youth groups who lead their communities learning on fertility awareness and family planning and offer counseling in two simple FAM: Standard Days Method (SDM) and TwoDay Method. Selected by their own peers, youth facilitators are volunteer members of their YIELD group between the ages of 18-30. They work in pairs (male and female) and can read and write in Acholi, the local language.

Youth facilitators receive training in group facilitation skills and content materials that prepare them to deliver fertility awareness and FAM sessions to interested community members. District and sub-county CDOs support the facilitators' work through mentoring, mobilization, and problem-solving. CDOs also help engage local leaders and family planning providers in supporting WALAN activities.

WALAN Components

WALAN includes four main components: community learning in fertility awareness, FAM group counseling (SDM or TwoDay Method), referring for family planning services, and establishing a supportive environment for family planning.

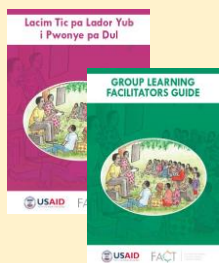
Youth Facilitators mobilize, prepare, deliver, and/or support:

Community Learning in Fertility Awareness	Group Counseling in FAM	Referring for Family Planning Services	Stakeholders Support
<p>Youth Facilitators convene groups of 20 to 40 community members to deliver a 1-1.5 hour session using the WALAN Toolkit to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> develop body literacy learn about fertility and optimal child spacing discuss family planning options learn about LAM and how to support breastfeeding mothers 	<p>Couples (2-6) meet with Youth Facilitators to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> attend a counseling session on a FAM receive a FAM if they meet method eligibility criteria plan to attend a subsequent method support session with fellow method users <p>Facilitators hold a women-only session when needed. Additional method support sessions are hosted for FAM users to help each other with couple support strategies and method-related issues.</p>	<p>Youth Facilitators support family planning promotion by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> informing community members of the availability and location of hormonal, long-term and permanent family planning services in their area distributing a family planning invitation card to those interested in obtaining a method, as a reminder about location of service providers 	<p>WALAN operates at the community level and establishes linkages with the health system and local leadership by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> hosting a FAM orientation in the context of family planning updates to service providers and VHTs in WALAN sites organizing awareness-raising events among cultural, religious, and community leaders

WALAN Facilitators' Toolkit

Facilitators are trained to use a set of simple job aids and low-literacy materials on SDM and TwoDay Method to deliver community learning sessions and couples counseling.

A *Facilitators' Guide* with five lesson plans comprises the essential content and the instructions for delivering the sessions. *Lessons for Community Group Learning* include content on body literacy topics, healthy child spacing, family planning methods (with an emphasis on explaining how the methods work to prevent pregnancy), and helping lactating mothers use LAM and follow optimal breastfeeding practices. *Lessons on FAM Counseling* include simple low-literacy protocols for delivering SDM and TwoDay Method in a trusted group atmosphere.



English & Acholi versions

Facilitators Guide (English & Acholi versions)

This guide includes instructions on how to facilitate learning sessions in the community and group counseling with couples. The guide provides instructions on how to use each of the facilitator support tools and five lesson plans that are designed to:

- engage community members in discussions on fertility, healthy child spacing, and different methods of family planning
- explain how family planning methods work and help clarify incorrect information
- teach interested couples and women how to use a FAM and refer for other family planning methods



Flipchart

The flipchart contains large visuals of reproductive organs, the menstrual cycle, and other supporting illustrations to use during larger community learning sessions. The reverse of the illustrations includes key messages for the facilitators as reminders on the information to cover during each session.



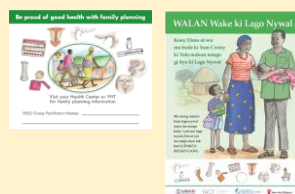
Activity cards

Four sets of activity cards are designed to stimulate reflection and discussion around key session topics: body awareness, healthy child spacing practices, couple communication, LAM and optimal breastfeeding. Session participants also use the cards to create stories or for role playing.



Family Planning Methods Board

This 3-dimensional display board includes all family planning methods on one side and a brief description of what the method is, how it works, and what to expect when using it on the opposite site. Facilitators circulate the display within the audience to inquire about participants' knowledge, practices, and preferences and, through discussions, help dispel misconceptions about each of the methods.



Family Planning Poster and Invitation Card

A family planning invitation card—handed out by Youth Facilitators during community sessions to members interested in a family planning method—encourages a visit to the health center or the VHT (community health worker) for family planning services. The family planning poster is also aimed at engaging community members in a conversation about family planning use and remind them where the methods are available.



Testing WALAN, from Design to Proof-of-Concept

To test the feasibility of the WALAN intervention, a proof-of-concept testing phase was launched by training 16 facilitators in eight villages in Gulu and Nwoya Districts from September 2015 to January 2016.

What We Tested

The proof of concept phase aimed to answer the following:

1. Can trained Youth Facilitators implement the WALAN activities?
2. Can participants learn how to use SDM and TwoDay Method correctly?
3. What are community perceptions and acceptability of WALAN activities?
4. Are the training and job aids effective in supporting facilitators' competence?

To answer these questions, we conducted observations of 24 community learning and group counseling sessions, two rounds of interviews with five SDM and four TwoDay Method couples, two focus group discussions with 16 Youth Facilitators, and nine key informant interviews with service providers and community leaders.

What We Learned

The proof-of-concept phase confirmed that trained youth facilitators are able to mobilize their communities, deliver learning sessions, and counsel users in their FAM of choice. The feasibility and acceptability of the WALAN intervention at the community level also was confirmed.

Proof of Concept Finding	Model Adjustments
✓ Youth Facilitators can deliver the community learning and group counseling sessions with some gaps in their ability to screen couples for FAM eligibility.	✓ Additional supportive supervision by the local CDOs scheduled monthly initially and quarterly later.
✓ Couples show correct use of SDM and TwoDay Method but felt unsupported in method use. Youth facilitators site leaders and community members perceiving TwoDay method as "unhygienic."	✓ Counseling instructions for checking vaginal secretions adjusted to emphasize looking at underwear or toilet paper as well as feeling the secretions and de-emphasize checking with clean fingers.
✓ Community leaders, service providers, and participants have positive perceptions and acceptability of WALAN activities but request that counseling in FAM not be restricted to couples and opened to women attend without a partner.	✓ Adjustments in FAM counseling schedules include sessions for couples as well as separate sessions for women who prefer to attend without their male partners.

Next Steps for WALAN

The results of the proof of concept phase were used to inform the pilot phase of the intervention, launched in April 2016 to 15 villages in the districts of Gulu, Nwoya and Amuru. The group learning model was refined to: (1) structure supportive supervision for the youth facilitators by the CDOs; (2) strengthen facilitators' training in screening for FAM users' eligibility; (3) add the provision of group counseling sessions to women who attend group counseling sessions without a partner; (4) sensitize community leaders and facilitators on dispelling misconceptions on TwoDay Method. The pilot will end in March 2017, and results from the pilot study will be used to assess the potential scalability of the WALAN model to other areas of in the Northern Uganda region, and beyond.