

Report of activities for the 2021 IUSSP General Assembly of the IUSSP Panel “Couples and Reproductive Health and Fertility”

The IUSSP Panel “Couples and Reproductive Health and Fertility” has had the following members: Vissého Adjiwanou (Université du Québec à Montréal); Ambrose Akinlo (Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife); Neetu John (Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health); Maria-Coleta Oliveira (Universidade Estadual de Campinas); Abhishek Singh (International Institute for Population Sciences) and Stan Becker (chair; Johns Hopkins University).

We have the guidance of Council member Jean Francois Kobiane (Institut Supérieur des Sciences de la Population/Université Joseph Ki-Zerbo) and assistance from the IUSSP Secretariat by Paul Monet.

We have had four sessions to date. Before COVID made in-person meetings impossible, two of our members (Visseho and Akinlo) sponsored a session on Couples’ Reproductive Health and Fertility at the 8th African Population Conference November 18-22 in Entebbe, Uganda. There were four presentations, one concerning Morocco, one concerning Uganda, one on comparing Ouagadougou and Nairobi and one on gender dynamics and fertility in SSA generally. The papers of these presenters are available on the IUSSP website.

We have had four zoom sessions. The first zoom session, initially planned as a meeting at the PAA2020, was held May 5, 2020 and was entitled: “Research and Programs on Couples and Reproductive Health” and had five presentations, one about Nigeria, one about Chad, one about Rwanda and two about India. There were 53 registrants and 42 attendees.

The second zoom session was held November 10, 2020 and was entitled “Programmatic Interventions in Reproductive Health Involving Men or Couples” and had five presentations. Two were general literature or project reviews, one was about India, one compared Bangladesh and Niger and one was about Malawi. There were 90 registrants and 55 attendees. The presentations and a video of the entire session are available on the IUSSP website.

The third zoom session was a debate held June 1, 2021 and was entitled “Should FP programs in patriarchal societies use limited funds to further empower women or to involve men?” There were two debaters on each side. There were 333 registrants and 144 attendees. We took a vote both before and after the debate; in both votes there were about 60% in favor of spending limited funds on male involvement and 40% on further empowering women.

The fourth zoom session was also a debate, held on November 8, 2021 and entitled “If the wife says that she wants no more births, but the husband does want another birth, can one necessarily say that her subsequent pregnancy is unwanted? Yes or no?”. Again, there were two debaters on each side. There were 428 registrants and 198 attendees. We took a vote both before and after the debate; in the first vote there were 70% for ‘yes’ and 30% for ‘no’. In the second, post-debate poll, 58% were in favor of ‘yes’ and 41% were in favor of ‘no’.

There is a general feeling that the debate went well so we are planning one or more others for the future. Several possible debate topics have been suggested:

1. "Power over, power with, and/or power within: When women achieve reproductive empowerment, does it necessarily come at the expense of men's power, i.e. is reproductive decision-making in the couple a zero-sum matter?" Yes or No?
2. If a couple comes together to an STI clinic, the clinicians should see them separately and never share results of tests from one partner with the other partner even when the person gives permission, but rather leave that to the person(s) themselves (i.e. later). Yes or No?
3. It is known that vasectomy is out-patient, less expensive and has less complications than tubal sterilization. But women are the ones who get pregnant and give birth so they normally have a greater incentive to end childbearing with sterilization. Therefore, in gender equitable societies:
 - a. more couples would choose vasectomy over tubal sterilization
 - b. even in this situation it is acceptable that the level of tubal sterilization is greater than that of vasectomy.

Other reproductive health topics for possible sessions under Couples and Reproductive Health include:

- male involvement in abortion;
- infertility in couples;
- couples and STIs.