

Invite them and they will come

Individualized invitations bring men to antenatal care



PHOTO BY MEG LANGLEY FOR CRS

Couples that attend ANC together undergo HIV testing and counseling together.

“At first, I thought ANC was solely for women’s issues and that men were not welcome. But my wife gave me a letter from the facility so I was obliged to come since it was an official letter. When I came, I was well-received by the health facility staff.”

—Damiyano Evison,
attending ANC with his wife
at Likangala Health Centre,
Machinga district

We didn’t know we were welcome

Do men just want to be asked? After just a few months of distributing love letters to husbands, pilot health facilities found that 33 percent of pregnant women who delivered letters to their husbands returned to the next visit with their husbands, an excellent short-term outcome against a baseline of 7 percent.

Recent efforts to engage husbands in pregnancy, delivery and newborn care decisions, especially those related to the prevention of mother to child transmission of HIV, have met with limited success. The USAID and PEPFAR-funded IMPACT program is taking a new approach—sending a letter from the antenatal care (ANC) nurse requesting the husband’s presence at the next ANC appointment. The letter is deliberately worded to acknowledge the husband’s interest in the welfare of his wife and unborn baby and to appeal to his sense of responsibility as a father. Although it carries the weight of an official invitation on Ministry of Health letterhead, it is written “with love.”

The results have been remarkable. Many men feel duty-bound to respond to the nurse’s request and, by attending, feel more engaged in the upcoming birth. Importantly, they are also now more likely to be tested for HIV.

A woman’s appointment

In Malawi, as in much of sub-Saharan Africa, ANC appointments have typically been seen as “women’s business.” However, because of the education and services provided at the ANC clinic, women have become more knowledgeable in maternal and newborn health along with prevention and treatment of HIV. Because HIV testing is an integral part of ANC, women in Malawi are also more likely to know their HIV status.

For men attending ANC visits, it is their first opportunity to learn important information

“If you don’t go with your husband, he is missing out on a lot of issues. Let’s go. Go with your husbands.”

—**Woman attending ANC visit with husband**, Milonde Health Center, Mulanje district

“We are now able to deliver services to a family in totality. Couples get antenatal services and HIV testing together and they can work together on prevention and adherence.”

—**Hezekiah Mwale**, In-Charge at Likangala Health Center, Machinga district



PHOTO BY MEG LANGLEY FOR CRS

ANC nurse provides Love Letters and instructs pregnant women to bring their husbands to the next visit.

about their wives’ pregnancies and deliveries. Through this experience, the men understand the critical importance of knowing their own HIV status. And for many, it’s their first exposure to an HIV testing and counseling opportunity.

IMPACT pilots Love Letter approach

IMPACT consortium members Africare, Chikwawa Diocese, Emmanuel International and World Vision International selected one pilot health center in their catchment areas. IMPACT met with the Ministry of Health (MoH) to gauge interest and gain approval. Health center staff members were trained on collecting data, and a baseline was established through data collected over three months. Thereafter, implementation of the strategy began and partners supported ongoing data collection. In the first seven months of implementation, ANC nurses distributed Love Letters to almost 2,500 pregnant women and collected data on the response, including reasons for non-attendance (Table 1). Traditional Leaders were also engaged and encouraged to promote in their communities the goodness of “escorting your wives to ANC.”

TABLE 1: Reasons for men’s failure to attend ANC*

Busy with work/business	29.50%
Do not understand why their attendance is important	20.50%
Shy	15.90%
Fear of HIV test	11.40%
Not willing	9.10%
Culture does not allow husbands to participate in ANC	4.50%
Other	9.10%

* responses were collected from the women

What do men learn at the ANC visit?

- **Pregnancy warning signs**
- **Nutritious foods to eat during pregnancy**
- **What to bring to the hospital for the delivery**
- **How to prevent HIV transmission**
- **Benefits of adherence to antiretroviral therapy**
- **Benefits of practicing healthy birth spacing**

“I can’t stop now. I will continue to attend visits with my wife until she gives birth and after birth I will also come. It has made me a role model among my fellow men. They ask me what happened at the clinic, and I tell them freely. I also encourage them to escort their wives.”

—**Innocent James**,
Ngabu Rural Hospital,
Chikwawa district

“I would recommend Love Letter to other facilities. If you verbally tell men, they won’t come. But with the letter, they come and realize it is valuable for them to be here.”

—**Mervis Mkhali**,
ANC Nurse at Milonde
Health Center, Mulanje
district

In a small qualitative survey, 20 men interviewed during their wives’ ANC visit revealed the following:

- **ALL** had received an HIV test, or were planning to be tested during this (first) visit
- **ALL** would continue to attend ANC visits
- **ALL** would encourage other men to attend ANC visits with their wives

A successful pilot, worthy of scale-up

Since IMPACT introduced the Love Letter idea and provided stationery and data collection training for the pilot phase, Malawi’s MoH staff are offering family-focused care to more couples. Families hear health messages, are tested together and learn about prevention and living positively. Men encourage their wives to deliver at the health center and commit to making sure they get there safely. Men value what they’ve learned and are likely to promote to other men the experience of ANC participation.

The primary reason for distributing Love Letters is to encourage male involvement in antenatal care and safe delivery, but when men attend the ANC visit with their wives they are also encouraged to be tested for HIV and attend counseling as a couple. Since only 31 percent of men know their HIV status, compared to 69 percent of women (MoH, 2013), bringing men to testing represents a key contribution to Malawi’s HIV prevention agenda. A sample of 20 men were interviewed, and 100 percent said they received an HIV test and counseling with their wife at the ANC appointment or were planning to be tested that day. Many men also noted that testing and counseling were important reasons to attend the appointment with their wives.

With an adult HIV prevalence of 10.8 percent in Malawi, it is important that both men and women are tested and receive counseling together. Health center staff and ANC clients noted the importance of receiving the HIV results together, as the counseling and referrals they receive strengthens PMTCT and HIV treatment adherence.

Success Story: Ngabu Rural Hospital, Chikwawa

Innocent James and his wife Omega are expecting their fifth child. Since Innocent received his letter, he and his wife have been attending ANC visits for this pregnancy together. Omega feels good that her husband is escorting her to the clinic. They live far away and she cannot walk all of the way so her husband uses his bicycle to get them to the clinic. They both value that they have taken their HIV tests and got their results as a couple. Innocent will also ensure that Omega gets to the health center safely when it is time for her delivery.



For Innocent and Omega, attending ANC together has helped them both focus on having a healthy baby.



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Implementation challenges

Incentives

Although they responded to the Love Letter by coming to the clinic, some men expected an incentive, knowing that other organizations have provided soap or t-shirts as encouragement. In addition, some health center staff resisted the Love Letter initiative and requested a monetary incentive to compensate for the additional work required.

Inadvertent discrimination

Strong commitment to receiving every woman's partner at ANC resulted in health center staff putting pressure on women who were not married or whose partners were not available to attend the ANC visit. Faced with staff members' assumption that they were married, some women (especially young unmarried women) were reluctant to disclose their marital status. Rather than be scolded for attending ANC unaccompanied, some found "volunteer" husbands to accompany them, or worse, stopped attending ANC altogether.

Tips for implementation

- **Pilot the initiative** in a small cluster of health facilities to gain a full understanding of reasons for non-participation, looking carefully at gender dynamics, cultural norms and potential socio-political barriers; to iron out roles and responsibilities among staff; to streamline data collection challenges; and to allow the initiative to gather its own momentum, which will ease scale-up.
- **Create a clear training guide** to ensure all health centers are trained to provide consistent, sensitive and encouraging messaging.
- **Engage Traditional Leaders** to help overcome reasons for non-participation.
- Introduce the option of alternative partners to ensure that women without permanent partners are not stigmatized and that all women have a supportive and knowledgeable companion during their pregnancy and delivery.
- **Consider adjusting appointment schedules** and ANC hours/days of operation to accommodate men's work schedules.
- **Serve the women** who bring a supportive partner first as a non-material incentive and to reduce the risk of men leaving because they are "too busy to wait."
- **Scale up and institutionalize the Love Letter strategy** by embedding costs in the MoH budget. To position the budget for integration into the MoH budget, hold discussions with district officials as early as possible. Consider MoH budget cycles and deadlines to ensure adequate preparation time. Assuming that training materials were developed and finalized during the pilot phase, ongoing budget is required only for training of the health facility staff, sensitization of Traditional Leaders and the printing of the letters.

Distributing the Love Letter to women during antenatal visits is a low-cost intervention that is relatively easy for health facilities to continue beyond the life of IMPACT. All health facility staff interviewed said they would recommend the initiative to another health center. In addition, every man and woman interviewed said he or she will encourage friends to bring their spouses to the ANC visits.

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