
**ASSESSING YOUTHS PERCEPTION TOWARDS FAMILY
PLANNING: A CASE STUDY OF TUMBWE VILLAGE, T/A
TSABANGO, LILONGWE DISTRICT**

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Article Received: 16 July 2026, Article Revised: 05 August 2026, Published on: 25 August 2026

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Doi: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijarp.9111>

ABSTRACT

Family planning is an important public health intervention that promotes healthy reproductive choices and helps reduce unintended pregnancies. Despite increased access to family planning services in Malawi, utilization among youths remains low due to various social, cultural, and individual factors. This study assessed youths' perceptions towards family planning methods in Tumbwe Village, Traditional Authority Tsabango, Lilongwe District.

The study employed a mixed-methods research approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. It was guided by four objectives: to assess youths' awareness of family planning services, determine the level of utilization of family planning methods, identify factors influencing utilization, and examine the relationship between youths' perceptions and family planning use. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

The findings revealed that awareness of family planning services among youths was generally high, but utilization remained relatively low. Condoms and injectables were the most commonly used methods. Fear of side effects, misconceptions, religious beliefs, social stigma, and concerns about confidentiality were identified as the main barriers to utilization. The study also found that youths with positive perceptions towards family planning were more likely to use contraceptive methods than those with negative perceptions.

The study concludes that increasing awareness alone is insufficient to improve family planning utilization among youths. It recommends strengthening youth-friendly services, improving reproductive health education, and addressing misconceptions through collaboration among health workers, community leaders, schools, and youth organizations.

KEYWORDS: Family Planning, Youths, Perceptions.

INTRODUCTION

Family planning remains a critical part of public health, especially in developing countries such as Malawi, where fast population growth continues to put pressure on social and economic development (United Nations, 2023). Despite increased efforts by the government and non-governmental organizations to expand access to family planning services, the use of modern contraceptives among young people in Malawi is still low (National Statistical Office & ICF, 2017). Studies show that many youths face challenges such as fear of side effects, myths, and limited access to youth-friendly services, which affect their willingness to use contraception (Chipeta, et al., 2020). Understanding young people's perceptions toward the use of family planning services is therefore very important to reduce unplanned pregnancies, meet unmet needs for contraception, and promote healthy reproductive decisions among Malawi's youth population (Chandra-Mouli et al., 2019).

Background of the study

Family planning (FP) is an important public health intervention that enables individuals and couples to decide the number and spacing of their children. Globally, family planning gained recognition in the early 20th century and expanded through organizations such as the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) and the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), which promoted reproductive rights and informed choice. Today, family planning contributes to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 3 on ensuring healthy lives and well-being (UNFPA, 2022).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, family planning programs expanded during the 1960s and 1970s to address rapid population growth and high maternal mortality. Although access to contraceptive services has improved, challenges such as poverty, cultural beliefs, religious influences, and misconceptions continue to limit utilization, especially among youths in rural communities (Guttmacher Institute, 2021).

In Malawi, family planning services were introduced in the 1960s and have since been integrated into public health services through government and partner support. Despite improvements in youth-friendly health services, contraceptive use among adolescents and young people remains lower than the national average (NSO & ICF, 2022).

Studies in Lilongwe District show that many youths continue to underutilize family planning services because of fear of side effects, misconceptions, stigma, and partner influence, despite

the availability of these services (Makwinja et al., 2021; Maruwo et al., 2022). Similarly, in Tumbwe Village under Traditional Authority Tsabango, there is limited evidence on youths' perceptions of family planning. Anecdotal reports suggest that misconceptions and negative perceptions discourage many young people from using modern contraceptive methods.

Therefore, this study seeks to assess youths' perceptions towards family planning methods in Tumbwe Village. The findings will contribute to improving youth-friendly family planning services and support interventions aimed at reducing unintended pregnancies, early marriages, and school dropouts among youths.

Research Objectives

Main objective

To assess the perceptions of youth towards family planning in Tumbwe village, T/A Tsabango, Lilongwe

Specific Objectives

1. To examine youths level of awareness about family planning services in Tumbwe Village.
2. To determine the proportion of youths currently utilizing family planning methods and the types of methods being used.
3. To identify socio-cultural, economic, and religious factors influencing youths attitudes towards family planning services utilization.
4. To examine the relationship between youths perceptions and their actual use of family planning services.

Literature Review

Empirical Evidences

Awareness of Family Planning Services Among Youth

Awareness of family planning services plays a crucial role in determining whether young people adopt contraceptive methods; however, global studies consistently show that while general awareness is high, detailed and accurate knowledge remains limited. Agha and Do (2019) observed that although 95% of youth in Kenya and Uganda had heard of modern contraception, only about half demonstrated correct understanding of method use and potential side effects.

Similarly, Sedgh et al. (2019) reported that adolescents in West Africa especially in rural settings possessed low levels of comprehensive FP knowledge, which contributed to widespread misinformation and low uptake of services. Evidence from Malawi reflects

similar trends. Kalimbo et al. (2020) reported disparities between rural and urban youths' FP knowledge levels, with rural youth less informed. Munthali and Chimbiri (2019) found widespread confusion between emergency contraception and abortion. Chavula et al. (2021) noted that many young people depend on peers and social media for FP information, which often results in partial or inaccurate knowledge, particularly in rural areas such as Lilongwe and Dedza.

According to the 2022 MDHS, although more than 90% of young women know at least one modern contraceptive method, only 41% understand proper use, effectiveness, and potential side effects (NSO & ICF, 2022). This implies that in Tumbwe Village, youth may have surface-level awareness but lack the detailed knowledge necessary for informed decision-making.

Utilization of Family Planning Methods Among Youth

Despite various global efforts to improve access to contraceptive services, modern contraceptive utilization among adolescents remains low. Bearinger et al. (2019) highlighted that only 28% of sexually active adolescents worldwide use modern contraceptives, with Sub-Saharan Africa recording the lowest usage rates due to persistent cultural, social, and structural barriers. Darroch et al. (2020) added that unmet contraceptive needs remain high among young women aged 15–19, largely due to stigma, fear of judgement, and limited access to suitable methods.

Similar patterns are evident in Malawi. Mvula and Malata (2020) found that youth in rural Lilongwe often rely on injectables and condoms, while long-acting methods are avoided because of fears related to infertility and other myths. Chipeta et al. (2020) further reported that only around 35% of youth in Central Malawi consistently use modern contraceptives, largely due to fear of side effects and inadequate youth-friendly counselling. These findings emphasize that barriers to utilization remain pronounced among rural youth.

Socio-cultural, Economic, and Health Facility–Related Factors Influencing FP Utilization

Socio-cultural Factors

Socio-cultural influences play a central role in shaping reproductive behaviour among young people, particularly in traditional communities. (Mavedzenge et al. 2020) found that strong cultural norms in many Sub-Saharan African countries discourage premarital contraceptive use, creating fear of judgement and social rejection among youth seeking such services. Alemayehu et al. (2018) similarly noted that parental disapproval and restrictive religious

teachings significantly reduce contraceptive uptake among adolescents in Ethiopia. In Malawi, these patterns are equally pronounced. (Mhango et al. 2021) reported that in rural communities, religious doctrines often discourage the use of modern contraceptives among unmarried youth. Kamndaya et al. (2019) added that many people in Central Malawi associate contraceptive use with promiscuity, which further discourages youth from accessing FP services. These socio-cultural dynamics remain powerful determinants of youth behaviour, particularly in rural settings.

Economic Factors

Economic constraints also influence whether young people access family planning services. (Mutombo and Bakibinga 2019) observed that rural youth in Zambia and Kenya often face transportation challenges and poverty-related barriers that limit their ability to reach health facilities offering FP services. (Eliason et al. 2020) reported that adolescents from low-income households in Ghana tend to rely on free or low-cost methods, which restricts their contraceptive choices. Evidence from Malawi shows a similar trend. According to the Ministry of Health (2021), financial constraints especially transport costs limit rural youths ability to access FP services despite the availability of free services in public facilities. NSO and ICF (2022) also demonstrated that young people from low-income households are significantly less likely to utilize FP services. These findings highlight that financial barriers remain a persistent obstacle for youth in rural communities.

Health Facility Related Factors

Health facility characteristics significantly shape young people's experiences with family planning services. (Sidze et al. 2017) found that adolescents in Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda often avoid seeking FP services due to judgemental attitudes from providers, lack of privacy, and unfriendly service environments. Chandra-Mouli et al. (2018) similarly reported that the absence of youth-friendly services reduces FP uptake among adolescents across many African countries. In Malawi, these challenges remain evident. Mumbwe et al. (2020) revealed that some health workers in rural facilities discourage contraceptive use among unmarried youth due to moral judgments. The Malawi Ministry of Health (2021) also highlighted persistent issues such as stockouts, lack of privacy, and unfriendly staff attitudes, which discourage young people from seeking FP services. These structural and interpersonal barriers contribute to low utilization among youth in rural areas.

Relationship Between Youth Perceptions and Family Planning Use

The perceptions that young people hold toward family planning strongly influence their willingness to adopt contraceptive methods. According to Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour (1991), attitudes significantly shape behavioural intentions and actual health behaviours, including contraceptive use. Supporting this, (Alemayehu et al. 2018) found that adolescents with positive attitudes toward FP were three times more likely to use contraception compared to those with negative attitudes. Evidence from Malawi reflects the same trend. Kamndaya et al. (2019) reported that negative attitudes especially fear of infertility significantly reduce contraceptive uptake among youth. Chipeta et al. (2020) also found that misconceptions and distrust of modern contraceptive methods continue to undermine contraceptive acceptance among young people in Central Malawi. For communities such as Tumbwe Village, these findings suggest that attitudes shaped by misinformation and cultural expectations likely play a major role in influencing FP behaviours.

Research Methodology

Research design and methodology

The study has adopted a descriptive research design, which has allowed the study to gather information from participants. This design has been appropriate because it has enabled an assessment of youths awareness, attitudes, and utilization of family planning services within their existing conditions and environment. The study has applied a mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative and qualitative techniques. Quantitative data has provided measurable patterns in family planning awareness and use, while qualitative data has offered deeper explanations of the social and cultural factors influencing youths reproductive choices. The integration of both approaches has strengthen the accuracy and depth of the overall findings (Creswell J.W.2018).

Study Population

The target population for this study comprised youths aged 15–25 years. This age group was selected because it is particularly vulnerable to early pregnancies, inadequate contraceptive knowledge, and socio-cultural influences that shape reproductive health decisions (World Health Organization [WHO], 2023; United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2022). In addition to youth respondents, the study included key informants such as family planning providers and community leaders, who were purposively selected because of their knowledge

and experience regarding youth reproductive health and family planning service delivery. Their participation provided expert insights into the challenges and factors influencing youths' utilization of family planning services (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Saunders et al., 2019).

Data collection methods

The study has used mixed-methods research, a combination of qualitative and quantitative instruments has been used to generate comprehensive and reliable data. The first instrument to be employed has been **structured questionnaire**, it has included both closed-ended questions and open-ended questions. The second instrument that has been used in this study is **Interview**, There has been semi-structured to capture measurable information while still allowing flexibility for deeper searching, lastly **focus group discussion** can generate qualitative narratives while incorporating short ranking or rating exercises for quantitative input. (Silverman D, 2015).

Data Analysis & interpretation

Response Rate

The study targeted 56 respondents selected from Tumbwe Village. All the questionnaires distributed were successfully completed and returned, resulting in a response rate of 100 percent. This response rate was considered adequate for analysis to address the study objectives.

Table 1: Response Rate.

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Questionnaire distributed	49	100
Questionnaires Returned	49	100
Questionnaires Not Returned	0	0
Total	49	100

The findings in Table 1 indicate that all targeted respondents participated in the study. The high response rate enhanced the reliability of the findings because all selected participants provided information for analysis.

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

This section presents the demographic characteristics of respondents including age, sex, marital status, education level and occupation. These characteristics were considered

important because they may influence awareness, perceptions and utilization of family planning services among youths.

Age Distribution of Respondents

Age was considered an important variable because knowledge, attitudes and utilization of family planning services often differ across age groups. Understanding respondents age categories helps explain variations in family planning perceptions and practices.

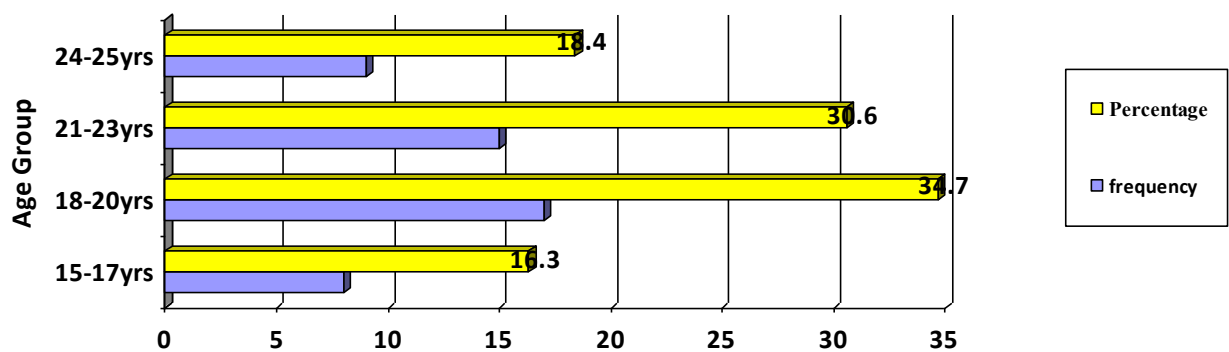


Figure 1: Age Distribution of Respondents.

The findings in figure 1 show that the majority of respondents (34.7%) were aged between 18 and 20 years, followed by those aged 21–23 years (30.6%). Respondents aged 24–25 years accounted for 18.4%, while those aged 15–17 years constituted 16.3%. This distribution suggests that the study captured views from youths within different stages of adolescence and early adulthood, thereby providing diverse perspectives regarding family planning.

Sex Distribution of Respondents

Sex was considered important because males and females may differ in their awareness, attitudes and utilization of family planning services.

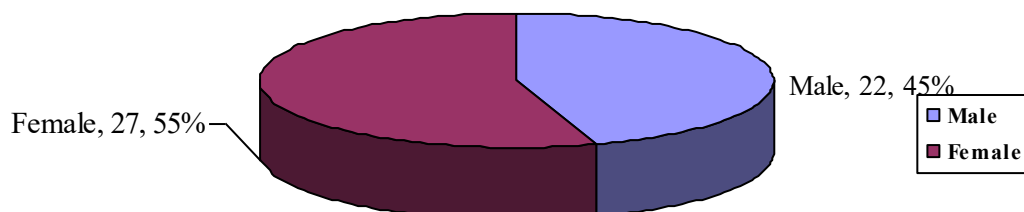


Figure 2: Sex Distribution of Respondents.

The findings indicate that females constituted the majority of respondents (55%) while males accounted for 45%. The slightly higher representation of females was beneficial because women are often directly affected by family planning decisions and reproductive health outcomes.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Awareness of Family Planning Services Among Youth

The first objective sought to assess the level of awareness of family planning services among youths in Tumbwe Village. Awareness was measured through respondents' knowledge of family planning methods, accessibility of information and exposure to family planning messages.

Quantitative Findings on Awareness

The findings reveal that awareness of family planning services among youths was generally high. Most respondents 93.9% indicated that they had heard about family planning, while 89.8% reported being aware of different family planning methods. However, only 61.2% indicated that they possessed adequate knowledge regarding family planning methods. This suggests that although awareness is widespread, broad understanding remains limited among some youths.

Qualitative Findings on Awareness

Qualitative data from interviews and focus group discussions supported the quantitative findings. Participants generally demonstrated awareness of family planning and identified several methods including condoms, injectables, implants and oral contraceptive pills.

Theme 1: One participant explained that:

Most young people know about family planning because health workers talk about it during outreach clinics and at the health Centre.

Theme 2: Another participant stated that:

We heard about family planning from friends, social media, radio and sometimes from school.

Participants further noted that although many youths heard about family planning, misconceptions regarding proper use and side effects were still common within the community.

Utilization of Family Planning Methods Among Youth

The second objective sought to determine the extent to which youths in Tumbwe Village utilize family planning methods and identify the commonly used methods. Understanding utilization patterns is important because awareness alone does not guarantee the actual use of family planning services.

Quantitative Findings on Utilization of Family Planning Methods

The findings shows that although awareness levels are high, actual utilization of family planning services is relatively low. Less than half of the respondents (46.9%) reported having ever used a family planning method, while only 36.7% indicated that they were currently using one. Further, only 32.7% reported regular utilization of family planning methods. However, most respondents indicated that family planning services were accessible in their communities.

The findings indicate that condoms were the most commonly used family planning method among youths, followed by injectables. Long-acting methods such as implants were less commonly utilized.

Qualitative Findings on Utilization

Interview and focus group discussion participants generally acknowledged that some youths utilize family planning services, although utilization remains lower than awareness levels.

Theme 1: One participant stated that:

Most youths know about family planning, but not everyone uses it because many are afraid of side effects.

Theme 2: Another participant explained that:

Condoms are the most common method because they are easy to get from hospitals, pharmacies and shops.

Participants further indicated that some youths avoid long-acting methods such as implants because of fears concerning infertility and future childbearing.

Theme 3: A focus group participant remarked that:

Many young people think implants can make someone fail to have children later, so they avoid them.

Socio-cultural, Economic and Health Facility Factors Influencing Family Planning Utilization

The third objective sought to identify socio-cultural, economic and health facility-related factors influencing youths' utilization of family planning services.

Quantitative Findings on Influencing Factors

The findings indicate that fear of side effects was the most significant barrier to family planning utilization, reported by 81.6% of respondents. Religious beliefs and partner influence were also identified as important factors affecting utilization. While most respondents viewed health workers positively, distance to health facilities remained a challenge for some youths.

Qualitative Findings on Influencing Factors

Analysis of interview and focus group discussion data generated four major themes:

Fear of Side Effects

Fear of side effects emerged as the most dominant issue.

Theme 1: One participant stated that:

Many youths fear that family planning methods can cause infertility or affect future pregnancies.

Theme 2: Another participant explained that:

Some girls stop using contraceptives because they hear stories about excessive bleeding and other complications.

Religious and Cultural Influences

Participants reported that some religious teachings discourage contraceptive use among unmarried youths.

Theme 1: One respondent remarked that:

Some churches teach that family planning encourages immoral behaviour among young people.

Participants also noted that cultural beliefs sometimes discourage discussions about sexuality and contraception.

Community Stigma and Social Judgement

Many participants indicated that youths fear being judged by parents, elders and community members.

A participant stated:

When young people are seen seeking family planning services, some community members assume they are into sexual activities.

Health Facility Experiences

Participants generally appreciated respectful treatment from health workers but emphasized the need for greater privacy.

Theme 1: One participant explained that:

Youths want confidentiality. Some fear being seen by relatives when visiting the health Centre.

Relationship Between Youth Perceptions and Family Planning Utilization

The fourth objective sought to examine the relationship between youths perceptions toward family planning and their utilization of family planning services. Understanding this relationship is important because attitudes and beliefs often influence health-related behaviors, including contraceptive use.

Quantitative Findings on Youth Perceptions Towards Family Planning

The findings indicate that the majority of respondents held positive perceptions toward family planning. Most respondents agreed that family planning is beneficial to youths and can help them achieve educational, economic and personal goals. However, a notable proportion of respondents still believed that family planning is only appropriate for married individuals, reflecting the persistence of traditional beliefs and misconceptions.

The findings suggest a positive relationship between perceptions and utilization of family planning services. Respondents with positive perceptions were more likely to report current utilization of family planning methods than those with negative perceptions.

Qualitative Findings on Perceptions and Utilization

Interview and focus group discussion participants consistently emphasized the role of perceptions in influencing family planning decisions.

Positive Perceptions Encourage Utilization

Participants who viewed family planning positively often associated it with responsible decision-making, educational achievement and economic stability.

Theme 1: One participant stated that:

Family planning helps young people avoid unplanned pregnancies and continue with school.

Theme 2: Another participant explained that:

When youths understand the benefits of family planning, they become more willing to use it.

Negative Perceptions Discourage Utilization

Participants reported that myths and misconceptions continue to influence contraceptive decisions.

Theme 1: One respondent stated that:

Some people believe family planning causes infertility, so they refuse to use it.

Theme 2: Another participant explained that:

There are many rumours in the community that make young people fear family planning methods.

Theme 3: Influence of Community Beliefs

Participants indicated that perceptions are often shaped by family members, peers, religious leaders and community norms.

Theme 1: One participant remarked that:

What people hear from friends and community members affects how they view family planning.

Suggestions & Recommendations

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings therefore confirms that perceptions play a critical role in determining family planning behavior among youths. Positive perceptions encourage utilization, while negative perceptions, often reinforced by misinformation and cultural beliefs, reduce the likelihood of contraceptive use.

The study found that awareness of family planning services among youths was generally high. Most respondents had heard about family planning and were aware of various contraceptive methods. However, comprehensive knowledge regarding correct use and side effects remained limited among some youths.

The findings further revealed that utilization of family planning services was considerably lower than awareness levels. Condoms and injectable were the most commonly utilized

methods, while long-acting methods were less frequently used due to fears and misconceptions.

The study also identified several factors influencing utilization, including fear of side effects, religious beliefs, partner influence, and community stigma and health facility experiences. Fear of infertility and social judgment emerged as major barriers to family planning use among youths.

Finally, the study established that perceptions significantly influence utilization of family planning services. Youths with positive perceptions were more likely to utilize family planning methods, whereas negative perceptions shaped by myths, misinformation and cultural beliefs reduced utilization.

Overall, the findings suggest that increasing awareness alone is insufficient to improve family planning utilization. Efforts should focus on improving comprehensive knowledge, addressing misconceptions, strengthening youth-friendly services and promoting positive perceptions toward family planning among youths.

CONCLUSION FROM THE STUDY

The study concludes that although youths in Tumbwe Village have a high level of awareness of family planning services, this awareness has not resulted in adequate utilization. Utilization remains limited by misconceptions, fear of side effects, cultural and religious beliefs, partner influence, and concerns about confidentiality. The findings further show that youths' perceptions significantly influence their use of family planning services, with positive perceptions encouraging utilization and negative perceptions discouraging it. Therefore, improving family planning utilization requires addressing misconceptions, strengthening reproductive health education, and providing accessible, youth-friendly family planning services.

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