



## Stanford eCorner

### Making Change Through Cultural Lines

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Using an illustrative example from her experiences in Niger, Melinda Gates talks about developing approaches to increasing contraception access and use, by tapping into the cultural realities and interactions between groups of men and women.



#### Transcript

Right before the London Family Planning Summit this summer I went to Niger and Senegal. And I went to Niger for a very specific reason, it's the highest fertility rate in the world in terms of number of babies had by women, it's the highest desired fertility rate in the world in terms of how many births men want their wives to have, and the highest desired fertility rate in the world in terms of what women how many children they say they want to have. So I thought, okay, highest of all these things in the world, super poor country, is this even possible? Is this even remotely possible of bringing contraceptives? Because we know in society after society where contraceptives have come, if you look at France or Germany or the U.S. or Bangladesh, which has an amazing longitudinal study since 1970, that if you get contraceptives to women it used to be two generations before you saw a sea change in terms of number of children they have, it's now one generation. And it spreads not on socio economic lines, it spreads on cultural lines. So I thought, okay Niger, can we possibly get at this in Niger? Very polygamous society. So I sat down and talked with several women in their homes, I stood by the well, I was about an hour and a half outside of Niamey, which is the capital, out in the desert, the absolute desert. And when I was talking to women about contraceptives, I said to this one woman, she had six children and she was using contraceptives. And I said to her 'well' - I'm saying to her about having some - are you going to have more children? She said 'absolutely not' and I said, 'what are you doing?' and she said 'I go to this clinic' and she was angry. She said 'why doesn't the clinic you were just at, I saw you there, near my house, I can see it from my house, why can't I get a contraceptive there?' Which I had actually just been haranguing the officials about that too.

She said, I have to go essentially seven kilometers and walk in the heat, and last time I went I couldn't get the shot. She said 'can't you see? Can't you see that we're starving here?' she said 'we are starving, starving, starving.' She said 'I can't feed my children and you're not getting me this shot, you're not helping me.' And when I said to her 'well okay you know about contraceptives' and they're actually where these village women and these healthcare workers who are starting to give contraceptive pills out, and they go through the dust and they hand you a little packet of pills not in the little plastic case, just - you get the pills. And so I said to her 'okay, you know about contraceptives, do your sisters in the village know about it?' and she said 'yes.' And she said 'the good thing about women is that we talk.' And she said 'we talk by the well, we talk when the children are born and we talk when we grind millet every day.' And she said, 'so we're talking about contraceptives and more of us are using them.' And I said to her 'okay' - so this is a polygamous society, her husband's not there and I said 'so what happens if another co-wife comes in?' And she got very somber. And she said 'well I just told you I'm not going to have any more children', but she said 'if another co-wife comes in I will have to have more children.' Because it's a race between her and the other wife for who has the most children to then inherit the land. And - but then she stopped herself and she said 'but there's nothing here' so she said 'and in my culture it's not if, we have to say - it's not when, it's if a woman comes in.' But she said 'there's nothing here so why would another woman want to have a lot of children.' But so I had to meet - so in terms of getting cultural change there what we have to do is we're setting up the country not - when I say we, the global partnership - but the country is setting up husband schools to teach the husbands first because they're the power structure in a polygamous

society, about why having fewer children make sense. And that it is a decision. The women think there is no decision in this, it's just like if you' gone to France many, many centuries ago, women didn't know there was a decision that they could make about their bodies. So we have to teach the husbands first, get them involved. I met with a whole group of the Imam. the whole structure all the way up in the country of the Imams and they say 'yes, the Quran says we can do family planning and we need to teach that to all the Imams in the village and we need to get them to spread the word.' So that's the way in Niger to start cultural changes is the husbands and the Imams and then get the women talking and get the contraceptives in, and let them make the decision then.