

OCTOBER 2023

Exploring the Power of Narratives on Reproductive Health in Francophone West Africa

Narratives serve as shortcuts that help us make sense of how the world works and why. Harmful narratives play a fundamental role in limiting reproductive health access and rights around the world. In collaboration with [the Ouagadougou Partnership Coordination Unit](#), we sought to identify the most relevant narratives influencing reproductive health across nine Francophone West African countries. By understanding the most prevalent and impactful narratives, we can support young advocates and national civil society organizations to develop approaches to change narratives which inhibit women's agency and reproductive choice.

Background on Narratives and Gaps in Research

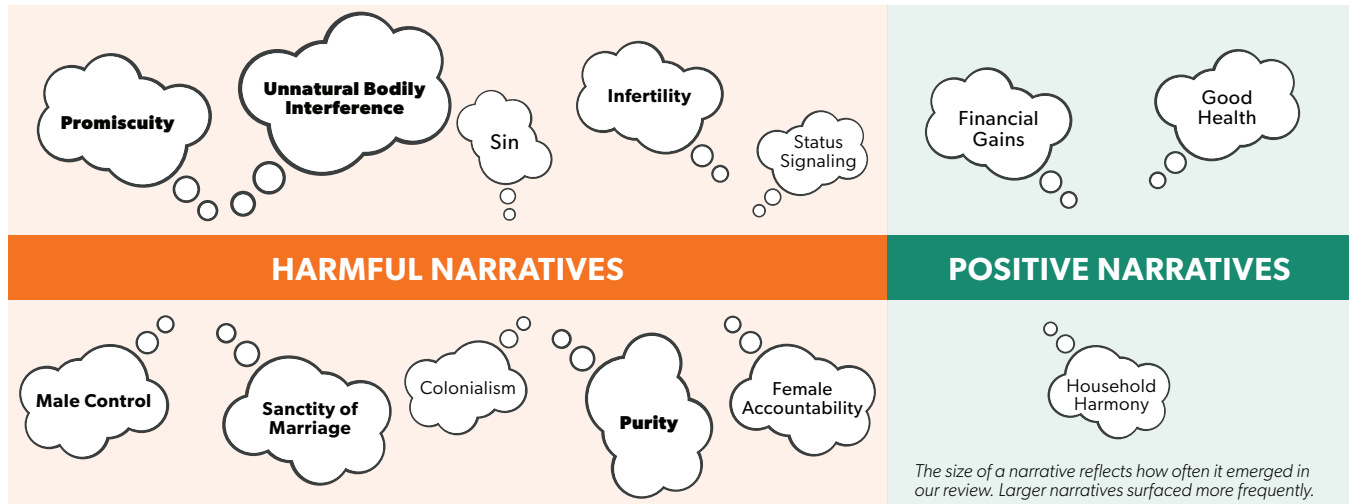
Every day we are inundated with information, opinions, and content from many sources. Research from the behavioral sciences has long established that under these circumstances, we develop shortcuts, or [heuristics](#), to organize and process information. [Narratives serve as heuristics](#) that help us make sense of how the world works and why. They are emotionally potent and memorable and can be formed from a wide range of sources. Narratives shape our [beliefs](#) and at times can even influence our actions in ways that are at odds with our beliefs.

Harmful narratives play a fundamental role in limiting reproductive health access and rights in the nine Ouagadougou Partnership (OP) Countries. They promote stigma around who is deserving of care or respect with important implications for equity. They shape perceptions of the choices women and couples have and their agency to make decisions. They create obstacles to contraceptive use by propagating misinformation as a means to exert control.

Despite their clear significance, little is known about the specific role narratives play in impacting reproductive health outcomes and policies. Even less is known about what approaches can most effectively change harmful reproductive health narratives in different contexts. Evidence from the African continent is even more limited. Only three studies from a [recent systematic review](#) of the use of narratives to impact health policy-making were identified from the continent.

Drawing out Reproductive Health Narrative Themes

The first step of any evidence-based narrative change effort is to identify the existing narratives, as well as their prevalence and impact on outcomes of interest. In our first stage of work, we sought to develop an initial understanding of existing narratives in the region by reviewing the available literature. This entailed identifying recent quantitative and qualitative papers from the nine OP countries, coding relevant attitudinal, belief, or normative statements or measures, and grouping relevant data into different themes or narratives. The following narratives emerged:



- ▶ *Promiscuity*: people who use contraceptives are promiscuous, and contraceptive use enables promiscuity
- ▶ *Purity*: unmarried girls should stay ‘pure’ by avoiding sexual activity and therefore do not need to use contraceptives
- ▶ *Infertility*: use of contraceptives leads to an inability to conceive
- ▶ *Unnatural Bodily Interference*: contraceptives disrupt the body in a variety of unnatural and at times concerning ways
- ▶ *Sanctity of Marriage*: marriage is about conception and contraceptives interfere with women’s key function, to conceive
- ▶ *Male Control*: men are in charge of important decisions, including whether or not to use contraceptives
- ▶ *Female Accountability*: women are responsible for getting pregnant and avoiding pregnancy, as men prefer, and are blamed for an unwanted pregnancy in the family or inability to conceive
- ▶ *Sin*: the use of contraceptives is sinful and against religious beliefs
- ▶ *Status Signaling*: prosperous men have many children
- ▶ *Colonialism*: foreign countries try to control and impose their will on others by promoting contraceptives
- ▶ *Good Health*: contraceptives keep both mother and baby healthy
- ▶ *Financial Gains*: the finances of the household are improved by using contraceptives
- ▶ *Household Harmony*: family planning creates harmony in the household

We did not find evidence in existing literature of narratives related to reproductive rights or the right to bodily autonomy.

Leveraging Initial Insights to Guide Future Research

There has been significant research on reproductive health around the world, including in the OP countries, which we sought to leverage in this exercise. This initial landscaping of narratives, however, revealed a number of important limitations in the current literature. Firstly, the majority of narratives identified were negative and we did not find evidence of positive narratives related to contraceptive use held by men. This finding may reveal an opportunity to support the development of new narratives or alternatively may highlight the limitations in using existing literature which is predominantly focused on identifying barriers to contraceptive use. Another limitation of existing literature is that it rarely explored the nuances of different beliefs, particularly related to the source of the identified narratives. Greater clarity around the source of different narratives would facilitate the development of more targeted narrative change programming. Finally, quantitative data related to narratives was very limited. Without a better understanding of the prevalence of different narratives and their relative importance on contraceptive uptake, it is challenging to understand where to focus narrative change efforts.

Despite the limitations of leveraging existing research, this initial synthesis provides an important foundation for understanding potential narratives as a means to identify where additional research may be particularly useful. Follow-on research to develop accurate narrative measurements, deepen understanding of the sources and local nuances of narratives, and measure the prevalence of different narratives, their relevance on contraceptive uptake, and population differences would create a roadmap to guide the subsequent co-design of impactful and innovative narrative change approaches.

The Promise of the Behavioral Approach

Narratives shape and limit the contraceptive choices and reproductive health of women and families around the world. The application of behavioral science to identify the most important narratives offers exciting opportunities to collaborate with national advocates and civil society organizations to catalyze effective narrative change in their communities.

Interested in learning more or collaborating with us? Contact us at gh@ideas42.org.