Discussion of family planning within an extended network was associated with greater knowledge of family planning methods. This suggests that extended networks may influence family planning decision-making by increasing the knowledge base upon which such decisions are made. Women who had discussed family planning with their extended network were also more likely to approve of family planning. Extending social interaction beyond one’s core network may also modify the social environment within which such decisions occur. By broadening an individual’s reference group, extended social networks may stimulate a reassessment of whether social norms oppose or support family planning.

Our results partially support earlier findings that associations between group membership and contraceptive knowledge and use vary by group type. Of the four groups with enough respondents to allow for a between-group analysis (i.e., men’s and women’s religious groups, women’s groups, and sports clubs), only membership in a women’s group had a direct effect on knowledge of family planning methods—most likely reflecting official family planning programs’ use of such groups as information channels.

It is also likely that these formal dissemination activities stimulate informal discussions among the members of women’s groups. Members of women’s groups were more likely to discuss family planning than were women in religious groups, in which informal dissemination activities are probably less common. If women’s groups merely replicated tightly knit core networks, even though the increased discussion occurring within them would have little effect on extending a woman’s social network. Since women’s groups are often a heterogeneous collection of women, the increased discussions that occur within them are likely to bring together women who might not otherwise interact.

However, proximity to extended network members alone appears to be insufficient in explaining the differences between women’s groups and other clubs. Women in religious groups were no more likely than nonmembers to have discussed family planning with their extended network, and no more likely to have discussed family planning with their core network. Also, it is reasonable to believe that participation in a sports club affords men the opportunity to interact with individuals outside of their core network. Therefore, it seems that while women’s groups may increase the potential to discuss family planning within extended networks, they also appear to activate this potential by stimulating discussions involving family planning.

Earlier research focused on the economic activities of women’s groups as facilitating contraceptive use, but our analysis finds that two additional factors associated with women’s groups may facilitate use among members. First, compared with members of religious groups, members of women’s groups appear to be more likely to discuss family planning, possibly because of greater exposure to this information within their group. In addition, the greater heterogeneity within women’s groups increases the likelihood that members will discuss family planning within an extended social network.

While we believe that our findings lend support to the hypothesis that community groups may promote the diffusion of family planning through the development of extended social networks, the nature of the data that we used limits the strength of this conclusion. The identification of core and extended networks would be enhanced with the collection of sociometric data, where respondents are asked to list the specific individuals with whom they interact, the frequency of these interactions, and whether they discussed family planning with each individual.

Lacking any specific information on the group activities to which respondents...