

STARTING THE CONVERSATION: Supporting young married couples' shared decision-making in Ethiopia

AUTHORS

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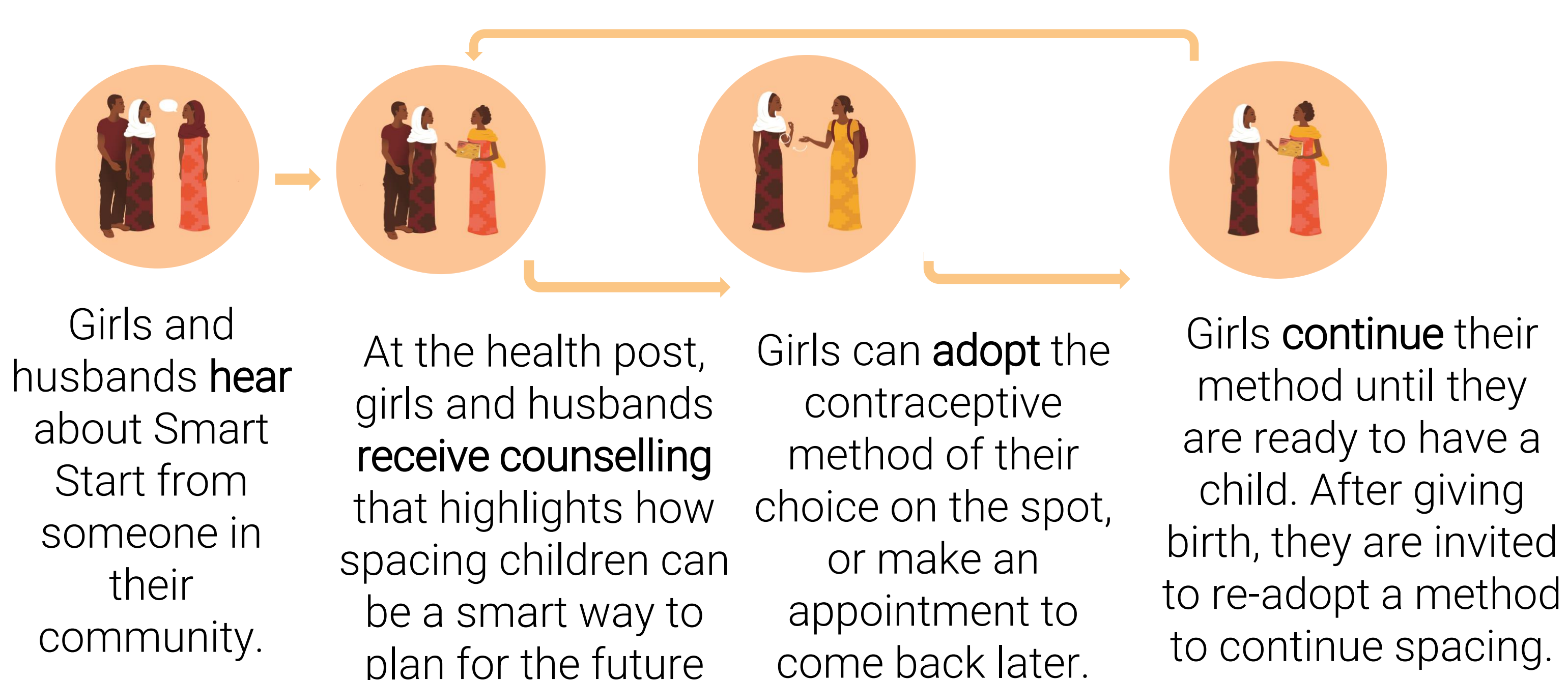
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ETHIOPIA BACKGROUND

- 82% of adolescent pregnancies occur in the context of child marriage.
- 1 in 2 of all girls in rural Ethiopia marries before age 18.
- Desire for family planning is high (1 in 2 married girls report a desire to delay pregnancy), but contraceptive use is low (1 in 3 currently use contraceptives).
- 90% of rural women live within 5 kilometers of a health post where free family planning services are available, suggesting that the problem is not only access.
- Social and cultural norms often shape young women's access to family planning (FP), with husbands playing a critical role in decisions.

PROGRAM INTERVENTION

- Smart Start is designed to increase voluntary uptake of contraception among married girls aged 15-19 in Ethiopia.
- Smart Start helps married girls and their husbands see contraception as an asset to achieve a stable and prosperous future.



The program evaluation aimed to determine to what extent Smart Start was reaching couples and whether the engagement was working as planned.

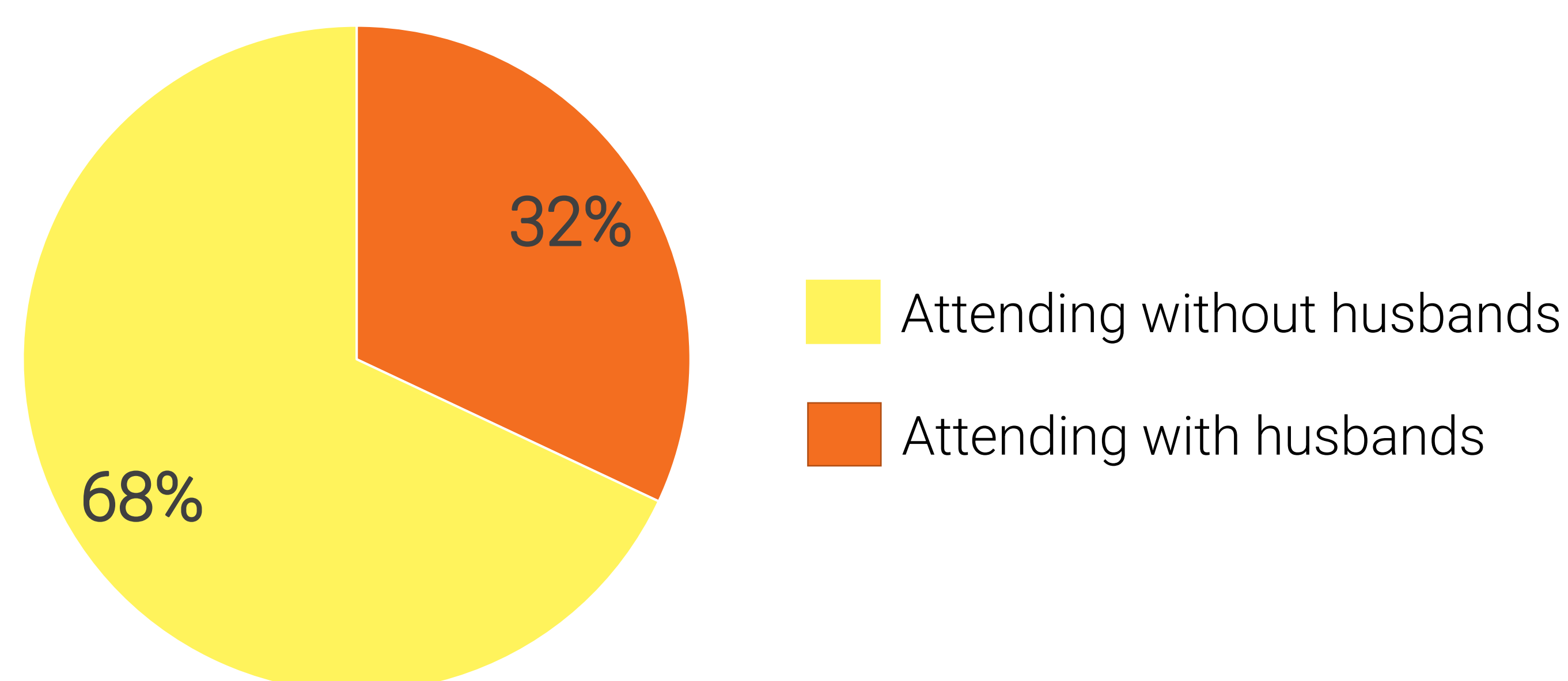
METHODS

The evaluation data sources included:

- A Process Evaluation conducted by Adolescents 360's external evaluator (Itad).
- Review of program documents and field interviews in the Amhara and Oromia regions between January 2016 – September 2018.
- Findings from routine program monitoring data tracking contraceptive uptake.
- Secondary analysis conducted by Itad for data collected from 26,963 Smart Start participants between January 2018 and April 2019.
- Field visits focusing on data collection activities to understand unexpected patterns in routine monitoring data. These data include semi-structured, in-depth interviews and field notes.
- In-depth interviews were conducted with 11 girls, 36 husbands, and 17 other key stakeholders in the Amhara and Oromia regions in June-August 2019.

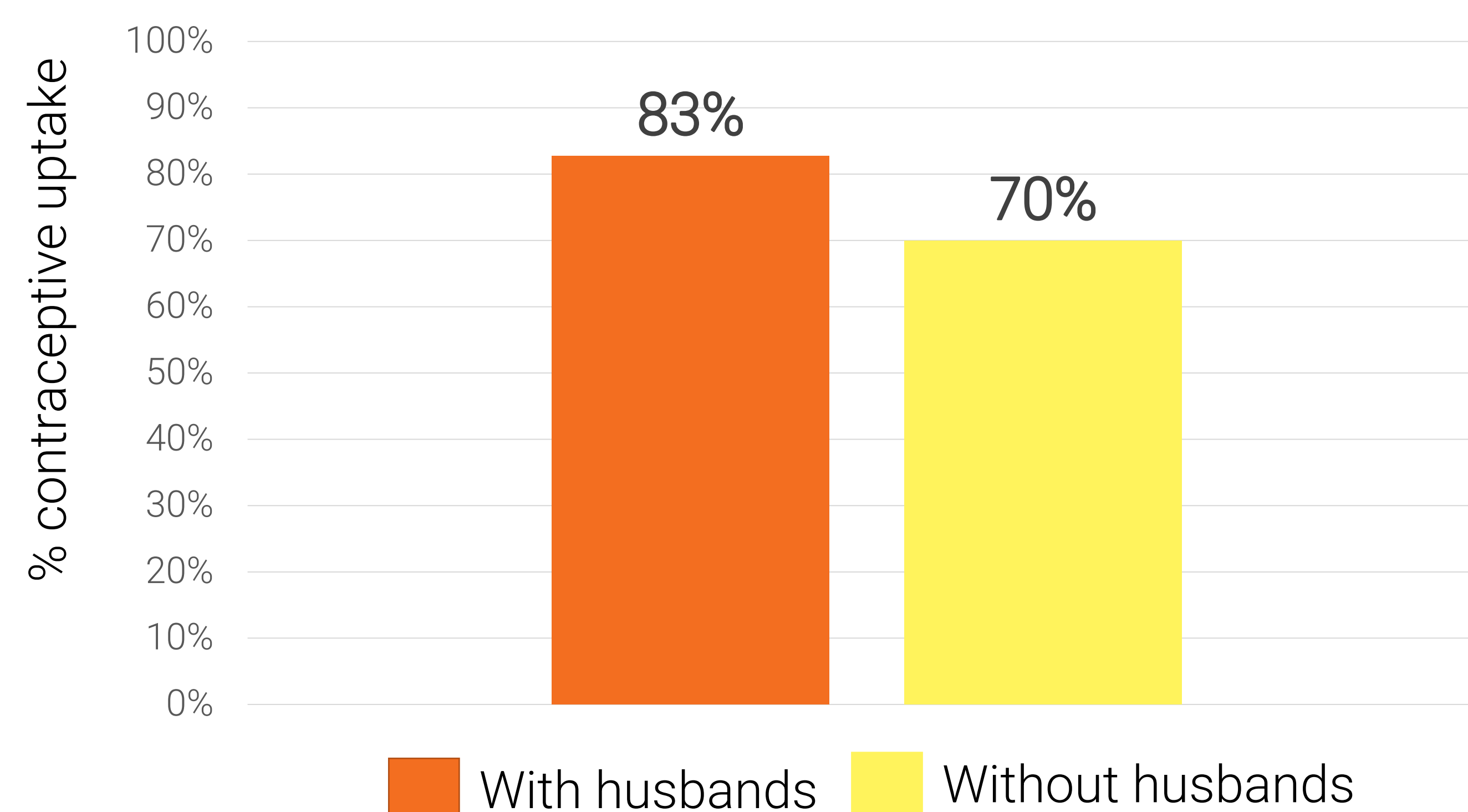
RESULTS

Husband attendance was lower than expected, with about 1 in 3 girls attending counseling as part of a couple



- Monitoring data from the first 16 months of implementation showed that nearly 75% of eligible married girls who participated in Smart Start adopted a modern method of contraception.
- Closer analysis of monitoring data revealed that husbands' attendance was lower than anticipated.
- However, contraceptive uptake was higher when husbands were present in counselling sessions.

Contraceptive Uptake Improves with Husband Attendance



When the team explored the contraceptive uptake trends using qualitative methods, we learned:

- Although girls attended a session alone, many shared what they learned with their husbands, often using the goal card to illustrate key ideas and convince them of the benefits of FP.



Smart Start Goal Card

"Yes they told me to give birth, but after I attended this lesson, I consulted my husband, and we are implementing [using contraception]... [He did not attend], he is not living here" – Married adolescent girl, Oromia

- While the goal card was found to be a useful tool for initiating conversations, many girls reported that it was difficult to convince their husbands of the benefits of FP.
- Girls welcomed external intervention to educate their husbands, explaining that family planning messages from program staff were perceived to be more credible.

"A session with my husband and [health worker] is better because she is better than me to explain and convince my husband on family planning." – Married adolescent girl, Oromia

CONCLUSION

- Smart Start eased access to family planning for many married adolescents by linking it with a stable future.
- Even as the program saw success, monitoring data revealed that a core element of the intended program – husband attendance – was often lacking.
- Through further exploration with girls, the team learned that Smart Start was supporting girls to negotiate family planning use with their husbands on their own.
- Based on the research conducted, A360 has designed an additional element to support husband's participation in contraceptive decision-making in rural Ethiopia.

This experience suggests wives can be successful self-advocates. Supporting young wives to initiate family planning conversations on their own is a promising approach. In addition, programs should explore how to directly reach husbands with relevant messaging.

