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CULTURE AND TECHNOLOGY: BRIDGING THE INFORMATION GAP TO SAVE LIVES

How do we learn about sex? In Kenyan history and culture, these lessons were passed to young girls through conversations with “aunties” (older, trusted women in their families or communities). As family and community dynamics have changed through the years, so too has sex education. Now these important conversations have been relegated to technical sex education classes in schools and in churches, which end up being one-way lectures (not even conversations), which often discourage questions. In families, these important conversations are also either lectures or are not addressed at all. And yet, the understanding and acceptance of “aunties” teaching these lessons continues to exist and is an accepted part of the culture.

In a country where 50% of maternal mortality is due to unsafe abortions and post partum haemorrhage (PPH), there is an opportunity to tap into the cultural tradition of the trusted “aunty” to share important, life saving information about sex, reproductive health and safe abortion. Kenyan demographic and health surveys suggest that the highest percentage of women procuring unsafe abortions are young women and adolescent girls. And why do they do this? These girls lack access to safe and reliable information on safe abortion while also not having a comprehensive sexual education. They are unaware of or unable to access affordable reproductive health services and are often too afraid because of the taboo surrounding sexual matters, particularly around reproductive health services and abortion. The lack of information about basic sexual and reproductive health coupled with misunderstandings about the legality of these services mean that too many times young girls turn to unsafe abortions with disastrous consequences. Reinvigorating the “aunty” tradition to encourage open conversations about sex with young girls is one way to ensure that they have access to the information and services that they need to make safe, sexual health choices.

Other studies have found that 29 million Kenyans are internet users and 33 million are mobile phone users. These are astonishing numbers

that are also quickly rising every day. The potential of using internet and mobile phone technology is enormous. Combining contemporary technology with long held cultural practices is how TICAH is approaching the challenges of sharing reliable, safe sexual and reproductive health information to young girls and boys across Kenya.

The “Aunty Jane Helpline” is a TICAH’S counselling hotline, where callers from all over Kenya can access an “aunty” (counsellor) 24 hours a day, 7 days a week in English and Swahili. Using the cultural tradition of the trusted “aunty”, the helpline offers callers the chance to have anonymous, open conversations about sexual health issues they are facing while also receiving safe, reliable sexual and reproductive health information, such as on postpartum haemorrhage (PPH) prevention, contraception, unwanted pregnancy and safe abortion. The helpline is enabling more young Kenyans to make safe and healthy choices for themselves. As part of the helpline, we have developed a nationwide referral database of health care providers who give reproductive health services at reasonable, highly subsidised and in some cases even free services. The helpline is also part of online conversations surrounding safe reproductive health choices on social media (Facebook and twitter).

TICAH has successfully run the “Aunty Jane Helpline” for the past two years. On average, the hotline receives up to 20 calls in a day with varying questions. However, 4 out of 5 callers need information on abortion. Other callers ask questions on other matters of sexual and reproductive health. Most of the callers receive our numbers through search engines on the Internet, while searching for information on “how to get a safe abortion”. It has a national reach and is a strategic tool to bridge the gap between demand and supply of sexual and reproductive health services. To popularise the helpline numbers we conduct nationwide dissemination campaigns through radio and IEC materials that are distributed through partners. A lot of social media campaigns are carried out on Facebook and Twitter. Radio shows are also used to disseminate the hotline numbers in rural and vernacular stations. This enables connection able to service provider to women in any part of Kenya. However, Airtime cost for the callers is a challenge and thus has reduced the number of women who may want to access this information through a call.

As the effectiveness and reach of the helpline has been seen, TICAH has supported partners in Tanzania, Malawi and Nigeria to launch their own helplines. This new approach enhances open communication on holistic sexual and reproductive health to the youth and adolescents in our communities. According to our findings, we recommend establishment of toll-free health helplines to bridge the information gap. The more organisations around Africa can learn from and support each other to improve one another’s’ programs, the more likely we can together make long-term improvements concerning sexual and

reproductive health choices for all Africans.