

Voices from Malawi



“FPAM is truly youth-friendly because they receive all youth when they come and they give the youth the services they need freely.”
22-year old female

Family Planning Association of Malawi: Making it Work

This case study is one of a series of qualitative reviews called “IPPF Changing lives” which capture the stories of IPPF’s beneficiaries and clients from around the world. A rapid PEER (participatory ethnographic evaluation and research) approach was used to train project beneficiaries to interview people in their social network. These voices provide us with powerful testimonies on lives changed - in some cases, lives saved - and illustrate how IPPF is making a difference.

Young people in Malawi are benefiting from access to youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services and information. Through its project ‘Making it Work’, the Family Planning Association of Malawi (FPAM) is reaching out to young people in under-served areas in Malawi, including the Dowa district, with integrated sexual and reproductive health and HIV services.

FPAM purchased two mobile clinics and is now working in 13 new ‘traditional authorities’ in

Dowa. FPAM staff devoted a significant amount of time and effort to establishing relationships with new communities and their leaders in order to build a supportive environment for the provision of services to young people.

The project enabled FPAM to expand its services to young people and improve the quality of service provision. FPAM trained its service providers on the elements of youth-friendly service provision, quality of care standards, and the national adolescent and youth health strategies.

FPAM’s project has contributed to positive changes in the lives of young people. Many young people are able to access youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services and information for the first time, which has helped them avoid unwanted pregnancies and for some has even meant being able to stay in school. The project has also given young people a space to spend their free time.

¹ www.options.co.uk/peer

“I went to FPAM to get information and counselling. Now, since being married, I introduced family planning to my wife. ... My life has totally changed because I learned more about family planning methods.”
19-year old male



“Knowing my (HIV) status and going to FPAM helped me to make the decision to go back to school.”
24-year old female

Achievements

Through the project, FPAM has been able to provide sexual and reproductive health information and services to young people in a remote area of Malawi. An overwhelming achievement of the project has been that these young people have learned new things that have enabled them to make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health.

Teenage pregnancy in Dowa is very common. For many young women, pregnancy means the end of their formal education, as well as dependence on a male partner or family members for financial support. Young people value having the knowledge from the project to avoid unwanted pregnancies now and in the future and to plan how many children they have. A 20-year old female said, “My life has changed because I know how to use a condom. Had I not come to FPAM, I could have become pregnant.”

The information from the project has also helped young people in their relationships with the opposite sex. One 17-year old male said, “FPAM has changed my life. I had that feeling due to peer pressure; I thought ‘when I have a girlfriend, this is what I’m going to do to her. This and that’. Now I don’t think that way anymore. ... Girls are the same as boys; I think of them the same. We chat; we tell each other what we are thinking. FPAM has improved my relationships with girls.”

FPAM has supported and encouraged young people living with HIV and young women with children to continue their education. One 16-year old female explained:

When I got pregnant, I told the news to my friend who advised me to go to FPAM. FPAM gave me information. ... My life has totally changed through the counselling I had at FPAM. I’m now back in school, and my parents are supporting the baby; they are happy because they did not know that I could go back to school after delivering a baby.

According to the young people, FPAM is a place where service providers are friendly, open, non-judgmental and helpful. This is in contrast to their perceptions of the government health facilities, where young people are often greeted with disdain or contempt if they admit that they are sexually active. Young people appreciate the way that FPAM staff treat all of the medical services they provide with confidentiality, and several young beneficiaries made explicit comments about how much they trust FPAM’s service providers.

A 23-year old female said, “They (FPAM staff) are friendly, they receive us well. They tell us which services they are providing; they ask us which services we would like. They encourage us to be free and explain to the doctor any problems that we might have.”

Another achievement has been that FPAM has provided a space for young people to spend their free time, which for some has meant being able to avoid drinking and smoking as a means of evading boredom. A 19-year old male said, “I recognized that I could manage without drinking or smoking; during my free time, I’d come to FPAM to play games.”

In addition to making positive changes to young people’s lives, the ‘Making it Work’ project has also been institutionally beneficial for FPAM. The project’s impact on FPAM’s services has been enormous. Not only has it allowed FPAM to provide more services, but the quality and accessibility of the services has improved markedly. In fact, FPAM is now seen by one staff member of the Ministry of Youth and Sports as “an example of how youth-friendly health services are supposed to be implemented.”

The project has also helped strengthen FPAM’s partnerships in the community.

Challenges

Clients, including young people, have to pay a fee for services at the FPAM clinics, so many young people choose instead to go to the free government clinics because they cannot afford to pay fees. Young people clearly prefer the quality, range and youth friendliness of the FPAM services to those of the government but, in some cases, simply cannot pay for services.

A 19-year old female explained, "I wish services were free because some of the services provided by FPAM are not available in government clinics, such as emergency contraception."

Another challenge expressed by the young people is that there are not enough condoms available to them. Young people have learned about contraception including condoms through the project and many are keen to start using them more frequently. However, the lack of easy access to condoms for the young people is a major barrier. FPAM distributes condoms in the remote areas of Dowa but it is often on an ad hoc basis, and in many cases condoms are otherwise unavailable.

Given the high rates of unintended pregnancy among young women in Malawi, the unavailability of abortion was expressed as a major concern. Although the project is meeting many sexual and reproductive health needs of young people in Dowa, the lack of abortion services is perceived as a gap in the range of services that FPAM provide. One 16-year old female said, "FPAM should introduce abortion services if someone does not want to keep a pregnancy."

Lessons

One project strategy that has helped lead to the achievements outlined above was hiring two new community reproductive health workers. Having this additional capacity is largely what enabled FPAM to expand their services, especially to young people in rural areas.

FPAM benefited from having extra staff dedicated to mobilizing young people and distributing contraceptives. They also set up support groups in those communities, including groups for young people living with HIV. Although highly successful, this approach requires additional resources and commitment to hiring and training new staff.

Another strategy that contributed to FPAM's successful expansion of services to under-served young people was establishing relationships with community leaders in Dowa. Time invested in building these relationships paid off, as they gave FPAM access to work with young people in these rural communities.

Reaching out to under-served young people in remote areas has been a hugely successful approach. Many young people in these communities live too far away from government facilities to access services or information on sexual and reproductive health.

FPAM is clearly contributing to positive changes among young people in communities throughout Dowa. One 16-year old summed up the benefit of FPAM's work in a simple statement: "FPAM is an important place for youth; they can get information and they can get treatment."

"When I started coming here (FPAM), I started playing volleyball but in the past, I would be doing other things with my friends like taking beer. I have learned new skills. When I come here, I'm kept busy, learning many new things and getting information."
21-year old male



“The staff give young people respect; they are open, and they keep secrets. They know young people’s right to freedom.”

19-year old male



changing lives ...

Malawi¹	
Country context	
Population (millions), 2010	15.7
Under-five mortality (per 1,000 live births), 2008	100
Maternal mortality ratio (deaths of women per 100,000 live births), 2008	510
Life expectancy at birth (years), 2010	54.6
HIV prevalence rate for adults aged 15 to 49 (% of total population) ²	11.0
Context for young people	
Adolescent fertility rate (births per 1,000 women aged 15 to 19), 2008	135.2
Gross enrolment ratio (% of school-age males and females), 2010	61.9

¹ UNDP, Human Development Report 2010. Available at <http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/MWI.html>. Accessed on 1st February 2011.

² UNAIDS: Malawi. Available at <http://www.unaids.org/en/regionscountries/countries/malawi/>. Accessed on 1st February 2011.



Family Planning Association of Malawi
 Area 14 Plot Number 123
 Lilongwe 3
 Malawi

The International Planned Parenthood Federation is global service provider and a leading advocate of sexual and reproductive health and rights for all. We are a worldwide movement of national organizations working with and for communities and individuals.

International Planned Parenthood Federation

4 Newhams Row
 London, SE1 3UZ
 UK
info@ippf.org
www.ippf.org
 UK Registered Charity No. 229476