Didier: Engaging young men in the informal sector

Abidjan, December 2018
Young men in Abidjan, as in other places, are highly interested in having sex. Their number one goal is to have more of it.

Rarely though, do they engage in formal conversations about sexuality with their peers, their parents or their romantic partners.

For some young men, the risk of HIV may be reason to use a condom, but unwanted pregnancy is not usually considered in this equation.

For these men, it’s the girl who needs to be concerned about pregnancy. As one young man put it:

“If it was the neighbor girl that got pregnant, then how do I know it’s mine? She could have been sleeping around with other boys.”

These are some of the insights discovered during the Human Centered Design phase of USAID’s Transform/PHARE project in Cote d’Ivoire, conducted in partnership with IDEO.org.

Abidjan is a cosmopolitan and modern city where girls are generally more empowered than in other West African cities.

Here girls are ready to demand condom use, buy morning-after pills, and express their desire to experience sexual pleasure.

Boys tend to be curious and want to learn how to engage with such cosmopolitan girls.

Young men in Cote d’Ivoire have a vibrant social life and are easily drawn to hang out with friends in maquis or local bars.
This means that getting them to attend a formal or semiformal educational activity on sexual and reproductive health (SRH) is very difficult.

They want to spend their time socializing and figuring out how to engage with young women, not sitting in a classroom learning about a topic that doesn’t fascinate them.

Like their age mates around the world, these young men were born in the digital age and often use social media and Facebook to communicate with others.

31% of the entire population in Cote d’Ivoire is made up of youth¹ and those between the ages of 18–24 make up 14.6% of the informal sector while men between 25–35 make up 43.3% of this sector².

55% of young people between ages 15–19 are at high risk of contracting HIV, among other risks of having unprotected sex³.

Considering all this, we know that youth working in informal sector is an important portion of the population and can’t be ignored.

These staggering statistics shed light on the opportunities that lie in working with young men in the informal sector.

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1. Politique Nationale de la Sante des Adolescents et des Jeunes, 16 et 17 novembre 2016, AgirPF
2. Etude sur le secteur informel Abidjan 2008
3. Politique Nationale de la Sante des Adolescents et des Jeunes, 16 et 17 novembre 2016, AgirPF
OUR GOAL
To facilitate debate and discussion on Sexual Reproductive Health with young men working in the informal sector in Abidjan.

COMMENT PARLER AVEC TA COPINE ?

COMMENT PARLER DE TA COPINE À TES PARENTS ?
**WHAT WE DID**

Through the insights on this group and discoveries on how they live daily, Transform/PHARE proposed to develop a Facebook-based story through comic book visuals.

A 10-episode story was developed and shared on Facebook for 10 consecutive weeks.

Community mobilizers walked around 3 working class communities of Abidjan motivating young men from the informal sector to visit the Facebook page and follow the story.

Over 5,000 young men were reached through this face-to-face contact, and their phone numbers were collected to create a database to continue interaction and engagement via SMS; 5,000 to 10,000 messages were sent each week.

Through this work, the story has become very popular among young men in Abidjan, and every week new followers are joining, while those who were following the story have continued to interact with, and comment on the episodes.

A Social Media Coordinator has followed all comments and questions closely, positively reinforcing gender equality, condom use, and seeking information to avoid unwanted pregnancies, as well as correcting misconceptions.

The Coordinator also responded to any questions related to SRH.

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**WHAT WE’VE ACHIEVED AND LEARNED**

The Facebook page has over 50,000 visitors and over 20,000 followers, of whom, 91% are young men and 98% living in Abidjan.

Although there is no way of knowing how many come from the informal sector, we know that at least two thirds of the visitors were students and therefore we can assume that not more than 30% would come from our target audience.

The story prompted conversations related to SRH with over 1,000 comments about condom use, getting pregnant while having casual sex, taking birth control pills or emergency contraception.

While Facebook comments may not be representative of the target audience, they have generally been quite favorable towards gender equality and condom use.

Facebook seems to be a very effective platform to motivate dialogue with adolescents and young men and has proven to be thought-provoking and engaging. While it has its limitations in allowing us to target a very specific audience, such as boys from the informal sector, it is nevertheless an effective way to engage young men.
THE FUTURE

In the coming year, we will test different ways to further engage young men in our target group.

This will entail increased interpersonal communications to support and build on the topics and themes presented on the Facebook page with the aim of better targeting men in the informal sector; a Club Didier will be formed to facilitate group discussions about the Facebook story and how it links to:

- Sexual and reproductive health,
- Gender equality,
- Condom use,
- Couples’ communication and contraception.

We are optimistic that the result will be positive - with engagement increasing by the day, we are certain that the best is yet to come.