



## COVID-19 IPPF Innovation and best practice: Digitalising for young people

**“The sessions came at a time that I really needed it, I was beginning to feel isolated with the lockdown imposed. It was great to be in contact with my peers and participate in the sessions.”**

Youth, Hebron, 19 years old

**Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) provides young people with accurate information and skills to make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and take control of their sexual well-being. Reports have suggested that high adolescent birth rates occur in all countries where sexuality education (SE) is curtailed.**

CSE programmes addressing gender, rights and power are up to five times more effective in reducing negative outcomes, including unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). CSE has a transformative impact with teaching methods that support students to question social and cultural norms around gender and develop gender-equitable attitudes, and leads to more consistent condom use, lower pregnancy rates, and reduced risk of HIV infection and partner violence.

COVID-19 saw the closure of schools and face-to-face gatherings worldwide, meaning a halt to CSE for many young people. In response, International Planned Parenthood Federation Member Associations got innovative in using digital tools to engage with young people and continue delivering Sexuality Education.\*

The initial findings of IPPF’s COVID-19 impact survey March 2020 indicated that the Palestinian Family Planning and Protection Association (PFPPA) had to pivot their youth services to reach young people in their homes whilst education facility closures were enforced as part of the lockdown.

This Learning Brief highlights innovations of PFPPA’s COVID-19 enhanced comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) strategies reached young people aged 15-25 in the pandemic.

\* Sexuality education through online tools is referred to as digital SE.

# COVID-19 impact

Youth in Palestine were affected by the closure of social spaces, including community centres and health clinics. Many young people lost their jobs due to business shutdowns, and with schools and universities forced to close, this restricted movement meant they could not access essential sexual and reproductive health (SRH) information and services in safe and youth-friendly settings.

## Enhancing services in the pandemic

In line with the March 2020 Ministry of Health of Palestine's guidance to avoid gatherings as a preventive measure, PFPPA cancelled all its outreach activities and planned training courses. This service reduction led to a decrease in the number of people they reached with accurate information on SRHR topics through face-to-face settings. PFPPA immediately shifted their youth services and awareness sessions to digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook messenger and Zoom.

## Digitalising for young people

PFPPA had 70 peer educators conducting digital sexuality education (SE) sessions in both the West Bank and Gaza via Zoom and WhatsApp groups. The virtual sessions were run with peer educators or at least one PFPPA staff member to each youth cluster. The groups were organised through contacts with local community-based organization's youth groups and peer educator networks with family, friends, and acquaintances. PFPPA also offered a playback (WhatsApp group recordings) link for youth unable to attend the sessions to access at their convenience. They could pick themes and conversations through the members of the group. Over 280 digital SE sessions were conducted in 2020, reaching over 4,600 youth with an average of 14 participants per sessions. The digital sexuality education (SE) sessions had a significant impact, with over 1,500 consultations provided through remote sessions in 2020.

**"The health worker was able to answer my questions in a way that I was not embarrassed and although I was reluctant to approach her about a personal issue, she made me feel like it was totally normal and now I am relieved after our discussion."**

Youth, Gaza, 22 years old

**"PFPPA contacted me to check if I had the contraception method I normally use, as I was really afraid the pills were almost finishing, and we were under lockdown. I felt thankful when they reached my house and provided me with the pills in addition to a hygiene kit. They actually saved me."**

PFPPA client, Bethlehem, 25 years old





## Key challenges

- The virtual approach was new for staff, volunteers, and peer educators, which took some time to adjust for running SE online.
- Maintaining youth participation and finding the best times for them to engage. The team observed a preference for the afternoon and scheduled sessions to maximize attendance.
- Connectivity was an issue due to the pressure on the networks; this was remedied by running sessions at different times to suit volunteers and peer educators.
- Recruiting new peer educators was a big challenge at first. PFPPA succeeded in strengthening ties to keep trained Peer Educators involved and active in their programmes.

## Next steps

- Due to the feedback from young people since the outbreak of COVID-19 and the increase in consultations, PFPPA is finalizing a mobile application for access to sexual and reproductive health, gender-based violence and SE information to launch May 2021. One significant component of the app will be to encourage youth participation in the Association's work.
- PFPPA will ensure using lessons learned from COVID-19 mitigation and leverage mobile app use for SRH services and SE as a complementary method to direct provision.

## Lessons

- The younger generation (17-22) preferred Zoom, as it provided them with the chance to meet and discuss issues directly and had the flexibility to run different rooms for group discussions.
- The virtual approach provided the opportunity to reach larger numbers of young people during different times and areas that PFPPA would not ordinarily reach within their regular geographical targeted scope.
- Youth can work under different circumstances and can be creative.

# Recommendations for SRH services, governments, and civil society organizations (CSOs)

- Based on the local experiences and needs identified during the COVID-19 response, guidelines for delivering digital SE and to provide technical assistance and capacity building should be developed. Digital SE interventions are likely to be more beneficial when mainstreamed and conducted along with online classes during routine school hours and should complement rather than replace face-to-face delivery.
- Governments should ensure that country-level emergency preparedness plans include continuous access to SE for all young people as part of contingency schooling systems, through online and other digital interventions aimed at reaching out underserved young people.
- Governments and CSOs should invest in closing the digital gap and ensure that essential SRH services are available and linked with digital SE during emergencies.
- As the most active digital technologies users, Youth networks, youth volunteers and CSOs working on youth should develop digital platforms to promote SE and increase young people's broader engagement, including those most vulnerable. Online SE must be delivered in safe digital spaces, free of risks related to cyberbullying and sexual and gender-based violence, where young people's privacy or anonymity is protected.

## Endnotes

### IPPF COVID-19 Impact Surveys

IPPF COVID-19 Impact survey 1 March 2020: [COVID-19 Survey Results | IPPF \(ippf-covid19.org\)](https://www.ippf-covid19.org/)

IPPF COVID-19 Impact survey 2 June 2020: [COVID-19 Round 2 Survey Results | IPPF \(ippf-covid19.org\)](https://www.ippf-covid19.org/)

IPPF COVID-19 Impact survey 3 November 2020: [COVID-19 Round 3 Survey Results | IPPF \(ippf-covid19.org\)](https://www.ippf-covid19.org/)

### About PFPPA

The Palestinian Family Planning and Protection Association (PFPPA) is a highly active organization both as an advocate for improved sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and in the delivery of sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services. These include family planning (FP) services, counselling, and guidance for women in psychological, legal, and social matters, lab tests, maternal, antenatal and post-natal care, and infertility services, delivered through service delivery points in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.



### Who we are

The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) offers sexual and reproductive health services that allow people to make their own choices. We fight for everyone to exercise their right to make those choices. We are local, through our members and volunteers, and around the world, through our network. We respond to needs, wherever they are, whoever they need, for as long as they want.

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Image 1: Palestine/ PFPPA

Image 2: Palestine/ IPPF/ Hannah Maule-ffinch

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