

Addressing Abortion Stigma: Initiatives to Date & Next Steps

Introduction

As a global sexual and reproductive health and rights organization, the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) works towards a world in which **stigma and discrimination** have no place. For many years now, IPPF, together with partner organizations, has implemented programmes to specifically address HIV stigma, such as the [Criminalising Hate, Not HIV](#) campaign, the [People Living with HIV Stigma Index](#), the [Positive? interactive learning toolkit](#) and investigating the [role of the media in combatting HIV stigma](#).

In the past five years there has been [increased global attention on abortion stigma](#). IPPF has thus expanded its work to **address the impact that negative beliefs and attitudes** about abortion has on access to, and scale-up of, safe abortion services. Abortion stigma [manifests at many levels](#), from individuals and service providers to communities, institutions, laws and policies, and wider public discourse including the media.

Since 2011 the David & Lucile Packard Foundation supported IPPF to implement a range of initiatives to **investigate and address abortion stigma**. This document summarises the main activities, outcomes and learning from the first phase of this programme between 2011 and 2013, and the next steps emerging from it.

What did we do?

The initiatives to investigate and address abortion stigma between 2011 and 2013 included:

In-depth research in two IPPF Member Associations, one in South Asia and one in West Africa, to investigate manifestations of stigma at the community, clinic and individual levels through clinic observations and interviews with clients attending for abortion related services, their partners and clinic staff. Out of the results, changes to improve clinical services were made, including enhanced training for support and counselling staff, and changes to clinic layout to increase client privacy.



"Many women here have abortions, but no one talks openly about it."

Small grants of up to USD \$10,000 to IPPF Member Associations in ten countries to implement **national, community and clinic level interventions** such as research on knowledge and attitudes to abortion, community level awareness campaigns to normalise abortion, and policy maker sensitisation.

Funding to support **small-scale clinic interventions** (USD \$1,000-15,000) in IPPF Member Association clinics in eight countries to implement changes to reduce stigma, such as introducing rights-based messaging and improving clinic entry points (physical layout and welcome of staff).

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Increasing **recognition and awareness** of abortion stigma through hosting and participating in expert meetings and organization of panels at international conferences.

Conducting research studies in two IPPF Member Associations in South Asia and West Africa, via interviews and focus groups with young people, clients and services providers to find about more about **abortion stigma as it relates to young people**. The findings highlighted the compounded stigma that young people face, and the need for tailored interventions to support them in accessing safe abortion services.

Finalisation of the [youth and abortion guidelines](#) to support IPPF Member Associations to scale up their work on young people's access to abortion-related information and services. Many of the recommended actions address abortion stigma at a community, organization and clinic level.

What did we learn?

Abortion stigma was **apparent at many levels**: women self-stigmatized themselves for having an abortion and kept their abortions secret, while healthcare workers feared being stigmatized by others for being associated with abortion services.

"In my district, it is a disaster to fall pregnant, above all when you are still at school; you'll die of shame if it happens"

Barriers to accessing abortion services included lack of knowledge and misconceptions about abortion, fear of stigmatisation, and fear of lack of confidentiality of service providers. For young people, barriers included concerns about fees and not being able to attend during clinic hours.

Successful strategies to address abortion stigma and its manifestations included:

- Engaging with **young people** in educational and community awareness activities to successfully increase uptake of abortion services (East Africa)
- Strengthening **networking and partnerships** with health services to oppose restrictive abortion laws and strengthen service referral mechanisms (Latin America, Europe)
- Using **media in creative ways**: one country in Latin America used radio to showcase the varied reasons women have abortions and promote available services while another country in Europe used social media to debate and combat an aggressive government anti-choice campaign
- Using **values clarification training** with service providers and religious leaders to reduce stigmatising attitudes and behaviours, and view abortions from a public health and human rights perspective (Latin America, West Africa, South Asia, Europe)
- Training service providers and clinic support staff on using **rights-based messaging** and ensuring client confidentiality to mitigate the impact of stigma on clients seeking abortion related services

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What are the next steps?

The David & Lucile Packard Foundation has awarded IPPF a two year grant from July 2014 to specifically focus on abortion stigma as it relates to young people's access to abortion services. This builds on previous initiatives and includes:

- Implementing **individual, community and clinic based interventions** in four countries where abortion stigma research was conducted under the previous grant. Abortion stigma at the community level will be measured at the beginning and end of each project using an adapted version of the [Stigmatizing Attitudes, Beliefs and Actions Scale \(SABAS\)](#) developed by [Ipas](#)
- Developing global guidance and tools to improve **abortion messaging** to ensure abortion is integrated into **peer educator training** and better **raise awareness of abortion related services** to young people
- Building **capacity of youth advocates** to speak out on the right to access abortion services
- Generating and sharing of **evidence and good practices** on addressing abortion stigma

"I used to look down on girls who had abortions but since I've become a midwife, and above all because of the training I've received in the project and what I've seen on the ground, I don't judge them anymore."

In addition to the abortion stigma work supported by the Packard Foundation, the [IPPF Western Hemisphere Region \(WHR\)](#) has been conducting a research study in collaboration with [Ibis Reproductive Health](#) to better understand the effects that the provision of abortion-related services have on providers' and clients' perceptions and experiences of stigma. This research has been conducted in four countries with different legal contexts and varying degrees of access to services: the Dominican Republic, Uruguay, Colombia, and Argentina. WHR will host a three-day meeting in April 2015 where all participating IPPF Member Associations and local research teams will share the results of their respective studies and participate in a workshop designed to aid each organisation to develop stigma reduction plans. WHR is also working with the [University of Michigan](#) to pilot facilitated group workshops to reduce stigma and foster resilience among abortion service providers in Colombia, Argentina, Bolivia, Mexico and Peru.

Where can I find out more information?

Please contact abortion-stigma@ippf.org for more information about any of the activities described in this document.

If you are an IPPF volunteer or staff member, you can download the extended report of the learnings from the 2011 to 2013 abortion stigma initiatives from [IPPF Exchange](#).

For wider information on global initiatives to address abortion stigma, visit the [inroads website](#), a global network to reduce abortion stigma and discrimination.

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