



Assessing the Effects of a Storytelling Initiative on Young Professionals

Results of the Family Planning Voices Evaluation (Phase II)

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Abbreviations

FP	Family planning
FP2020	Family Planning 2020
FP Voices	Family Planning Voices
FP/RH	Family planning and reproductive health
JHU	Johns Hopkins University
K4Health	Knowledge for Health
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

Executive Summary



“Sharing your sexual history is a big thing, and when you’re sharing such personal details, and when the person on the other side of the table is judging you, then you will never want to go back to that place. We really need compassionate health service providers who are not judging you and are there to help you.”

Shubham Choudhary, India

Introduction

Meeting the Family Planning 2020 (FP2020) goal of enabling 120 million additional women and girls to use contraceptives by 2020 depends on upholding the basic right of all people, including young people, to decide, freely and for themselves, whether and when to have children and how many to have. Understanding how best to reach and engage young professionals with essential family planning information is key to achieving the priority reproductive health goal of enabling countries to meet their family planning needs.

Family Planning Voices (FP Voices), created by The Knowledge for Health (K4Health) Project and FP2020, documents and shares stories from people around the world who are passionate about family planning. A 2016 evaluation of FP Voices found that the initiative positively influenced knowledge, attitudes, and self-efficacy related to family planning, and it also strengthened the global family planning community. For young people in particular, FP Voices may provide a space to share and hone one's unique voice.

This study sought to answer the following research question: What are the various ways that FP Voices affected young family planning professionals who shared their story on the FP Voices platform?

Methods

This qualitative study included in-depth interviews with young family planning professionals between the ages of 18 and 30 who had shared their story with FP Voices and whose stories had been published on the FP Voices platform. In particular, the study looked at the experience of sharing one's story via FP Voices, the immediate and more long-term effects of sharing one's story, and the power of photography in storytelling.

Results

A total of 11 individuals participated in the study (five women and six men). Participants came from 10 countries in Latin America (n=2), South Asia (n=2), and Africa (n=7).

The majority of participants were motivated to share their story in the hope that they could inspire others, shed light on the role of young professionals in family planning and reproductive health (FP/RH), spark change, and bring visibility to the organizations they work for. The experiences of young professionals who shared their story via FP Voices were grouped into three themes as shown in the table below.

Theme	Findings
Experience and effects of being interviewed and photographed	The majority of participants had a positive experience during their FP Voices interview. Participants appreciated that the interviews were conversational and conducted by someone familiar with FP/RH.
	Many participants noted that sharing their story with FP Voices instilled a personal and professional sense of confidence, pride, and recognition for their work.
	Participants highly valued having a professional quality portrait, and most still used the photographs. Several participants also linked the portrait to their professional development as young professionals.

Theme	Result
Experience and effects of having a story published	Many participants felt that sharing their story with FP Voices was a contributing factor to increased professional connections and opportunities.
	Participants perceived that their stories would inspire and encourage other young professionals and support the recognition of young people as professionals.
Design of FP Voices	Participants shared that professional quality portraits add value to the story and provide authenticity to FP Voices.
	The design of the FP Voices initiative—profiling young professionals in the same way as recognized world leaders —provided a sense of validation and credibility to young professionals.
	Participants perceived FP Voices to have a wider international reach and wide coverage than would usually be accessible. Therefore, they viewed FP Voices stories as an opportunity to bring increased visibility to their work and their organizations, highlight issues in their countries, and amplify the voices of others.

Discussion

Increasing demand for family planning services, specifically for young people, is one of the USAID priority reproductive health goals. Understanding how best to reach young people and supporting their engagement in FP/RH is key to achieving this goal. These results show that young professionals working in FP/RH felt validated and recognized when their experiences were documented and disseminated through FP Voices. The initiative also provided young FP/RH professionals a sense of increased visibility within and outside of their networks. These findings suggest that FP Voices can serve as a platform to strengthen the development and the networks of young professionals in FP/RH and serve as a key stepping stone to future career opportunities.

Introduction



“I think every single young person’s story is different. This is why it is important for us to bring every young person’s story into the global agenda. [There is] a connection between the global goals and those individual stories. Those individual stories brought up a lot of interesting issues that are happening in Georgia in terms of young people having information about sexual and reproductive health, including contraception.”

Gvantsa Khizanishvili, Georgia

Meeting the Family Planning 2020 (FP2020) goal of enabling 120 million additional women and girls to use contraceptives by 2020 depends on upholding the basic right of all people, including young people, to decide, freely and for themselves, whether and when to have children and how many to have. When family planning and reproductive health (FP/RH) projects and organizations include young people in planning and decision making, they are more likely to conceptualize and implement programs and policies that reflect young people's realities and respond to their needs. Partnering with and employing young people as researchers, evaluators, advocates, and program designers can improve data and program quality (Rutgers, 2013). Yet when Women Deliver surveyed 600 young sexual and reproductive health advocates from around the world in 2016, respondents reported several major barriers to meaningful youth engagement: (1) Cultural and religious norms often prohibit young people from speaking openly about FP/RH or accessing quality information or services; (2) Language and literacy barriers also contribute to a lack of access to FP/RH knowledge among young people; and (3) Absence of trust in and lack of value placed on youth perspectives—particularly those of young women—pose barriers. Finally, there are few opportunities for young people to engage in meaningful, ongoing dialogue and partnership in FP/RH efforts (Women Deliver, 2016).

Family Planning Voices (FP Voices), created by The Knowledge for Health (K4Health) Project and FP2020 with support from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), documents and shares stories from people around the world who are passionate about family planning. The FP Voices team interviews individuals from different age groups, countries, and professional backgrounds, highlighting the diversity of the global family planning community. The resulting quotes and professional portraits are published on the FP Voices website and K4Health and FP2020's social media channels, and are displayed at various international and national events. The initiative has more closely connected a vibrant community of family planning professionals who learn from each other by sharing their own stories. Since 2015, FP Voices has interviewed and photographed hundreds of people and published more than 700 stories on FPVoices.org.

In 2016, K4Health conducted a mixed-methods study to better understand the effects of FP Voices on interviewees, story readers, and workshop attendees. This study explored changes in knowledge, attitudes, practice, and ability to share information related to family planning. Key findings included the following:

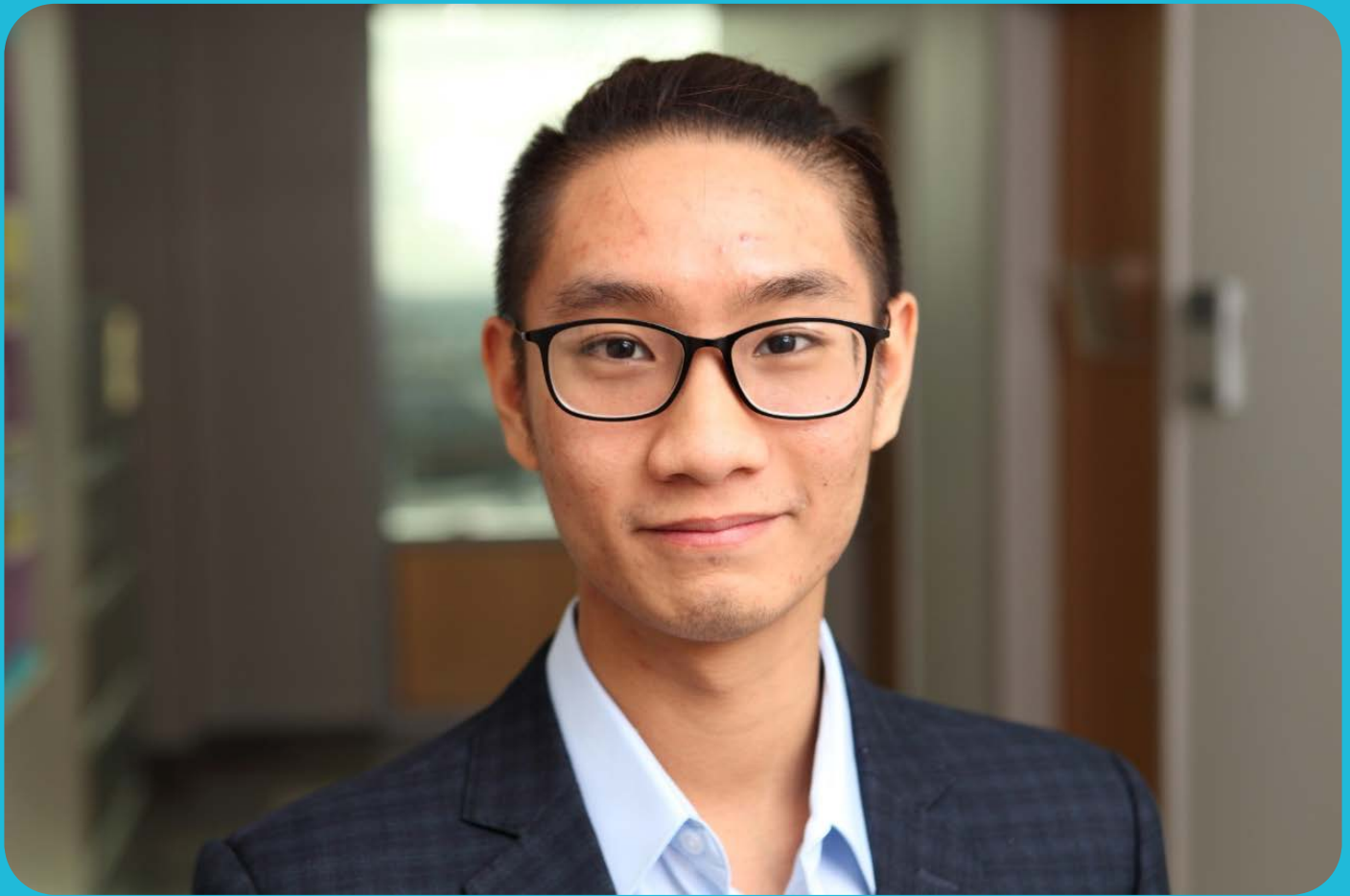
- Overall, FP Voices positively influenced knowledge, attitudes, and self-efficacy related to family planning among storytellers and story readers.
- Among FP Voices storytellers, 90 percent of respondents felt a reinforced sense of commitment to their family planning work, 93 percent felt more confidence or pride in their work after sharing their story, 95 percent said that it reinforced the importance of their work, and 89 percent felt more connected to the global family planning community.
- Stories related to youth, specifically the importance of youth FP/RH issues like early marriage and adolescent pregnancy, were most widely shared on social media and via interpersonal communication.

See [Assessing the Effects of a Storytelling Initiative: Results from the Family Planning Voices Initiative \(Phase I\)](#) for the complete report of study findings.

Understanding how best to reach and engage young professionals with essential family planning information is key to achieving the priority reproductive health goal of enabling countries to meet their family planning needs. However, not all young people have access to platforms through which they can share their knowledge and experiences. For young professionals in particular, FP Voices may provide a space to share, and potentially start to shape or hone their voices.

This study sought to answer the following research question: What are the various ways that FP Voices affected young family planning professionals who shared their story on the FP Voices platform?

Methods



“I met a very young girl with three children. When I talked with her, I could see the light in her eyes. She told me that she wants to study, but because of the poor conditions and her need to work to support the husband’s family, she has no chance to learn. This is also true because of the traditional custom in that area—everyone wants a son. That’s why she keeps getting pregnant and keeps giving birth until she has a son. For me, her story sparked the inspiration to work and to try my best to promote family planning and sexual health and rights.”

Le Hoang Minh Son, Vietnam

This qualitative study included in-depth interviews with young professionals who shared their story with FP Voices and whose stories had been published on the FP Voices platform. Participants were between the ages of 18 and 30 at the time of the phase II interview. Recruitment took place via email using purposive sampling based on age, region, and gender. In particular, the study aimed to include representation from Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Many of the eligible participants were from Africa therefore, the study aimed to include regional representation within Africa to ensure a broader range of stories. Constructs of interest included the experience of sharing one's story via FP Voices, the immediate and more long-term effects of sharing one's story, and the power of photography in storytelling.

Data collection, analysis, consent, and ethical considerations

K4Health received ethical approval from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Institutional Review Board. Each participant provided informed consent prior to participation. Interviews took place via Skype. If a participant was not available via Skype or phone, the interviewer provided him/her the option to provide responses to questions sent via email. A member of the K4Health research team conducted all in-depth interviews over a three-week period in August 2018. Researchers audio recorded and transcribed all interviews (n=10) and translated written responses from French to English (n=1). The researchers coded and analyzed transcripts using grounded theory to identify common themes and findings in Atlas.ti.

Results



“I’m from Mexico, and I see a lot of disparities and injustices in the country. A scene I will never forget from when I was growing up was this young girl that looked around my age. I was playing in a playground with my friends, and she was carrying her baby around and asking for money. I remember thinking, “Why is she carrying a baby? She should be playing with us. Not being in charge of a child—a child being in charge of a child!”

Marisol Ruiz Celorio, Mexico

A total of 11 individuals participated in the study (five women and six men). Participants came from 10 different countries in Latin America (n=2), South Asia (n=2), and Africa (n=7).

The experiences of young professionals who shared their stories with FP Voices can be categorized into the following three themes:

- Experience and effects of being interviewed and photographed
- Experience and effects of having a story published
- Design of FP Voices

Most of the participants shared their story with FP Voices at the Women Deliver Conference in Copenhagen in 2016. Others shared their stories with FP Voices at the International Conference on Family Planning in Bali in 2016 and at a regional meeting in West Africa. Participants represented a range of professional positions, from executive director to volunteer. Most had worked in the area of FP/RH for five years or more and had a specific focus on youth, specifically girls. Most participants were not familiar with FP Voices before being asked to share their story.

Before sharing their story, participants expressed several reasons for wanting to take part in FP Voices. Overall, they were not motivated out of personal gain, but by the hope that they could inspire others, bring attention to the important work of young professionals in FP/RH, spark change, and bring visibility to their organizations. Specifically, the idea of inspiring others—especially other young people, whether professionals or not—motivated participants. A participant from West Africa noted:

I decided to share my story with FP Voices, because it felt nice to share my experience, but also, and, more importantly, I thought that it could impact or inspire other young people like me to commit themselves to promoting healthy and responsible sexual behaviors for avoiding STIs, HIV/AIDS, and unwanted pregnancies that have consequences like illegal abortions.

Participants also expressed a desire to highlight and validate the work of young professionals. A participant from South Asia noted:

...[I wanted to] showcase that young people in a developing country and in a low-resource setting are delivering and reaching their goals that the governments and other bodies commit [to]...I can contribute [by sharing my story] and it could motivate some other people as well...

Participants also hoped that FP Voices readers—including decision makers, those creating and implementing programs for young people, and donors—would not only read their stories but be motivated to take action. One participant from West Africa shared:

I was also told my story was going to be shared, and that means better coverage... That makes it [so that] more people are going to be reading about my stories, and some of them are decision makers who are going to be making policies in favor or against me and the girls. I also knew there were a lot of funders who would read the stories and be motivated to fund some of these issues. I just really wanted those stories to be heard so that even programmers, too, who probably didn't know about those girls from rural communities...it was an opportunity to shine a spotlight on what the real issues for the communities are and to get people to act: decision makers, funders, programmers and all.

Experience and effects of being interviewed and photographed

The interview

Overall, participants had positive experiences during their FP Voices interviews. Several participants said that their interview with FP Voices was different from other interviews they had given, because it felt more like a conversation and they were given the opportunity and time to truly express themselves. They also appreciated that the interviewer was familiar with FP/RH programs. One participant from Latin America shared:

It was conducted more as a conversation instead of, “Question one, what do you think about family planning? Question two, why do you think family planning is important?” I think it overcame the generic questions about family planning and why it is important, and it goes through the story. I think that’s a very nice approach, in terms of reflecting some of the diversity of the people that get interviewed...

Or in the words of a participant from South Asia:

The whole experience was interesting...They talked to me very informally, and that’s what I liked...They were asking questions based on my thoughts and whatever I was sharing. It fueled my interest and whatever I had in my mind, I brought up everything.

Some participants appreciated being able to approve the final story in advance of publication, which allowed them to speak up if they didn’t feel comfortable with the content. Seeing what the final story looked like gave them a sense of comfort.

The act of storytelling

The act of telling a personal story affected young professionals both personally and professionally. Many participants noted that sharing their story made them feel recognized for their work as young professionals and instilled a sense of professional confidence. One participant from East Africa stated, “It’s given me the confidence for being recognized at a national level as a reproductive health and family planning champion.”

Another participant from West Africa said this of being interviewed:

...[It] is like bringing you out of your shell. This was me sharing an emotional story, but then sharing it makes you feel relieved even though you have not solved the problem. But it’s like the saying, “A problem shared is half solved.” Personally, I felt relieved that I was sharing the story. I would say that, in some way, it contributed to building my agency and my confidence level.

Other participants gained confidence to grant interviews in the future and speak about their work like this participant from West Africa:

...After that interview, after sharing my story, it became easier for me to tell the story again when people asked almost the same question. It helped me form a story around what I already know, but then, because no one had asked me before, I didn’t know how best to put it.

One participant from West Africa also shared that, since their interview with FP Voices, they started a storytelling initiative among youth they work with in Africa:

From that interview, it [storytelling] has just become my thing or my style. During presentations it helps clarify things, and it helps you put faces on the numbers and data that we read all across...I got back to the field, and I started coaching the girls to say their own stories. I became like the FP Voices... First the stories were actually to

help the girls build their confidence level to be able to talk about their stories and coordinate their story. It was first for them to build their capacity...I remember that, moving forward, we had a few traditional religious leader meetings or workshops, and we invited some of the girls. I took part in preparing them to come forward to say their stories. Some of the girls even had other speaking engagements, even outside the subnational, and that was also [a chance] for them to tell their story from their communities.

The portrait session

The professional quality portraits in FP Voices stories—and the act of being photographed—uniquely contributed to young professionals’ experiences sharing their stories with FP Voices. The majority of the participants highly valued having a professional quality portrait taken at the time of the interview. Participants received all of the photographs that were taken of them electronically, whether they were used by FP Voices or not. Most of the participants still use the photographs for personal and professional use almost two years after having been photographed—on their CV, as their formal headshot for conferences, and for their social media profile picture.

While the majority reused the images provided by FP Voices, they also stressed that they would not have reused them had they been poor quality. Participants felt the quality of the photograph was an essential component of FP Voices and that the FP Voices platform and stories would not be as effective without them. One participant from East Africa stated, “The quality matters a lot...I don't think we should leave any room for compromise when it comes to quality of the photographs.”

Several participants also linked the photograph to their professional development. A participant from Latin America noted that this was the first professional photograph anyone had ever taken of them and shared what that meant:

That was the first time someone took a headshot of me that I can use, and it's not me with a shady background or, you know, a picture that you take with your family and then you crop and you have the arm of another person on your neck...And although a picture is not everything, it's, for example, what someone will see when they see your LinkedIn profile...It also has an empowering component that is like the professionalization of young advocates, because it gives you something to share in media appearances. You have a picture. There's a link [to the story] where you are saying why you think this is important and how you want to change the world.

A few participants felt that the professional quality portrait served as an incentive to share their story with FP Voices and that it was a key component of the initiative. One participant from West Africa noted that their colleague—who recommended they share their story with FP Voices—told them, “[FP Voices] takes very wonderful pictures.” They went on to explain:

In addition to [the photographs] adding value to the story, giving life to the stories, I see the pictures as one of the returns on investment for people that are being interviewed. The person that first mentioned FP Voices to me mentioned the fact that FP Voices takes great pictures so it's part of the value proposition for FP Voices.

Experience and effects of having a story published

Participants shared examples of how they felt others—including family members, coworkers, or other professionals—took them more seriously after their story was published. One participant from East Africa expressed:

Having such an interview, it comes not only with mixed reactions, but with some level of clout. You begin to be considered important, to be treated differently. It gives you some level of exposure, and people get to notice you easily.

Another participant from Latin America shared similar feelings:

People took me more seriously in some way, especially, I guess, my family. Because when they saw that it was an international blog that was talking to me...they took my work more seriously than before. Before, I was just a volunteer doing crazy, stupid, feminist work. After that, they understand more about the issue and why it's important for me....On a personal level, it helped me to establish the seriousness of my work.

A participant from West Africa shared:

I was proud of myself, proud of my story, and [proud] to see other people that I didn't know all over the world encouraging me to share my story on other websites and platforms.

Forging connections

Many participants felt that sharing their story with FP Voices contributed to a growing number of professional connections and opportunities after their story was published. These connections were often a result of the broad, global dissemination of FP Voices stories to both national and international audiences. For example, one participant from West Africa saw their participation in FP Voices at the Women Deliver Conference as the impetus for a series of events that led to “one good exposure to another afterwards.” Another participant from East Africa shared:

Immediately after the interview came out, I was called by [organization] to speak on a panel. I've also been approached by the media to speak about sexual and reproductive health and rights issues and family planning...It [FP Voices] raised my profile a bit, and I would link it to the process. I cannot deduce that it was from FP Voices and that story...but I think it contributed.

Several participants provided concrete examples of how sharing their story with FP Voices directly linked them to new connections and opportunities. A few remembered receiving positive comments after their story was shared on social media, like this participant from West Africa:

Sharing my story through FP Voices was a wonderful opportunity for me, because right away, young people, especially on Facebook, were contacting me asking for information on how to join my network and also for information and guidance on specific topics like STIs, contraceptive methods and so on.

A participant from South Asia described how participation in FP Voices led to an ongoing professional connection to a foreign Minister for the country:

When I was at the Women Deliver conference in Copenhagen...there was a booth, and FP2020 and FP Voices had my portrait and everything. I met the former foreign minister for [the country], and she was there as a government delegation. I knew her because of the media, and she's someone everyone knew. But she found me in the middle of the conference exhibition hall, and she said, "I was looking for you. I saw your picture, and you are from [country], and I don't know you. I should know you. You are doing amazing work."...This [FP Voices] somehow built a relationship between a youth advocate and a senior policy maker, so it is amazing...Over the last two years, I invited her to three meetings that were organized by [the organization], and for each and every meeting she never said no. She attended, and she made good commitments and is actually walking the talk, so it's really helpful.

The ability to read other FP Voices stories and see the faces of individuals working for the same cause all over the world contributed to a sense of solidarity and kinship. Participants spoke about this as a motivational factor to continue their work. A participant from Latin America noted:

This [sharing stories from young professionals] is really important so that you don't feel that you are alone in the battle for rights and family planning. When I read some stories about other countries, it's like, "Ok, this is like an

international problem. It's not just my country and our fault to be in that position.”...I feel connected with other people, and I feel like my work matters and I am not alone...Sometimes you are feeling really low and down, because you don't want to work in this anymore, and you're like, “Oh my God, why did I choose this field?” And then you read these stories, like, “That woman in Nigeria is working with something like ten times bigger than my problems. This is amazing, I have to continue.”

Perceived risks to storytellers

Two participants shared the concern that expressing views that their government may not agree with could have had negative consequences for their personal safety or future job prospects. One participant from East Africa noted:

When the story was published, there was a lot of attention towards me as an individual, and especially being in my context...people can brand you. That alone gave me some kind of fear of what people would say, but I knew I was doing the right thing...That was also at the time when there was increased attention to LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender] issues, and the environment at that time—there was a clamp down on sexuality education....In such a context, you can imagine how I was feeling as an advocate and also having my work published. There was a lot of fear for my situation as an individual. In one way, I felt cautious and fear for my own life.

Another participant from North Africa shared:

Sometimes you feel ok to share something, and then all of a sudden things change, and you can't talk about something anymore. At the time of the story it was ok, but maybe two days later, things changed, and you can no longer share. There isn't anything I would have said different.

Despite expressing these concerns, participants stressed that they would not have said or done anything differently had they had the opportunity to share their story again.

Perceived benefits to story readers

The majority of the participants said that they would encourage other young professionals to share their stories with FP Voices, because the story might influence someone's life. One participant from West Africa shared, “You have to share to make people learn. To inspire people. Your story alone can be an inspiration to people to change behavior.” Participants also described the benefits to story readers—particularly family planning professionals—of reading FP Voices stories.

Perceived benefits for young professionals

Participants hoped that sharing their stories via FP Voices would encourage and inspire other young professionals working in similar fields around the world. For example, a participant from West Africa noted that by reading stories from young professionals, other young professionals would feel as though their work was also worth sharing:

If young people read stories on FP Voices, they get challenged. They get encouraged that, ok, this is similar. For instance, I could read a story about what my friend is doing in Ghana and see that this is similar to what I am doing in [country]. Now if he can get this platform to share his story, that means my story in [country] is also worth sharing. It's encouraging for young people to read stories on FP Voices. It gives them hope. It validates what they are doing.

Participants also felt that other young professionals could benefit and learn professionally and personally from reading their stories. Several expressed that learning from other people's experiences can help shape a young

person's professional and/or personal decisions. For example, a participant from West Africa noted:

When other young people come out to share their experiences or talk about ways in which they have worked to expand access to responsible, appropriate information that they need to know to become responsible people in society and to lead healthy, fulfilling lives, it is quite inspirational. A lot of my fellows at home are waiting just to have a push, just to be able to do what they want to do. To be passionate. If they cannot get that around them in their communities, then they can read from other young people. They can see other young people doing what they wish to do. It's an inspiration.

Perceived benefits for established professionals

Participants saw FP Voices as a platform through which established professionals could see that young professionals make valuable contributions to programs and policies, and that many are already successfully working in the field of FP/RH. A participant from West Africa noted:

Young people want this older generation to know that we are not subjects of pity. We are not people that you just hand out talkings to. We are people that are professionals in our rights. That are competent. We are taking the lead. We are taking initiative. If our stories are published, it helps those older generations to begin to perceive us correctly. "Oh, so these young people have the technical competence to apply for grants from international organizations. These young people have the competencies to plan and implement projects, to do monitoring and evaluation, to do budgeting, to engage media correctly."...By the time they read our stories and [see] how we are making a difference in our communities, they begin to see us as partners. Partners in progress.

Others hoped that after reading stories from young professionals, older professionals would recognize the unique contributions young professionals have to offer and include them in decision-making processes. One participant from Latin America highlighted the unique knowledge they felt young professionals brought to the table:

We also see that there are young professionals doing stuff that matters. For example, from academia—ok you don't have a paper published, but you told in your story that you facilitate sessions, that you are in touch with communities. You have an empiric knowledge that maybe a lot of researchers don't have in the lab.

Similarly, participants felt that sharing stories from young professionals could counteract the perception by some older adults that young people are not involved or not interested in issues that affect them. For example, this participant from Latin America expressed:

I hear a lot from adults that young people are not involved in social issues. It's a lie. It's completely a lie. I guess that it [reading stories] can change the perception that young people aren't worried, number one, and are not working, number two, in social issues and in health services.

Design of FP Voices

The design and execution of the FP Voices initiative—including the ways the stories and portraits were displayed—affected young professionals' experiences with the platform.

The portraits

Several participants described the role of a powerful portrait in connecting people to the story and the storyteller. Participants felt that the quality of the image entices people to click on the story to read more. A participant from West Africa noted:

I think having a photo alongside the story brings the story to life, and it lets whoever's reading the story see the

actual face of the person who's sharing their experience. The quality of the photo is also very important and makes the story more engaging.

Participants also spoke about how the collection of photographs on FP Voices lends authenticity to the platform, as it allows readers to visualize the array of people working in family planning globally. One participant from South Asia noted:

It [the photograph] [helps] the viewer—or those who access the website—to know that I was involved in this cause. It gives more authenticity or more value to the work that we are doing, that people who are involved in family planning are doing, because they can see people in India, Tanzania, and the U.S., and different age groups and different varieties of people and different ethnicities working on this...The reader might have a little more connection with the piece they are reading in the blog.

Several participants expressed that the professional quality of the photographs strengthens the credibility of the platform and the seriousness of the information. For example, one participant from South Asia stated, “A professional photograph is more helpful rather than an unprofessional one, because this gives a seriousness to people reading.” A participant from North Africa noted, “The quality [of the photographs] is professional and should be professional. It conveys an image of seriousness. You can always tell how comfortable someone is in a photo.” One participant from East Africa also shared, “The photos are from the very people that are telling their stories, which makes it more believable—more unique.”

The platform

Participants attributed the design and execution of FP Voices to increased visibility for themselves as individuals and for the work of their organizations.

The FP Voices platform provided young professionals a place to share their stories and experiences—something that most participants noted is not common for young professionals. One participant from South Asia noted, “We have limited space for sharing stories about what we do in the field, what we feel, and what our thoughts are.” Therefore, many participants expressed that this was a platform through which to share information about the work they do with a broader audience. One participant from East Africa shared:

I recognized the fact that it was another space for me to be able to share my work, to share my experiences, to share my perspective on how I look at things in my community, so I considered that as an opportunity for me to be able to showcase [my work].

Another participant from East Africa stated:

For us, as youth actors, we have limited opportunities to [engage with] media. Sometimes media may want to engage accomplished individuals. Having a space like FP Voices profile a young advocate or practitioner [provides] an alternative space that is able to build and highlight some of the good work that these youngsters are doing in their communities, which mainstream media at the moment may not be in the position to give some of us. For example, we usually convene activities in our country, and we invite media, but before they come, they ask you, “Who’s there? What government official or Minister?” If you have as many spaces such as FP Voices profiling young people then you are changing the narrative, so it’s a wonderful thing.

The design of the FP Voices initiative—giving the same weight to profiles of young professionals as recognized world leaders on the platform—provided a sense of validation or credibility to young professionals. One participant from South Asia noted:

For me it was also a sense of recognition, because it put it [the story] on a big space with a range of people. Some of them were president of a big organization or CEO.... So it’s an achievement or recognition for the work

that I am doing. It also gave me a sense of fulfillment in a sense that I was contributing for a cause.

A participant from East Africa shared:

I felt it was so big to the extent that I was going to be sharing a space with change makers around the world, so it was something I considered really huge...These were accomplished individuals who have done tremendous work in family planning and sexual and reproductive health work. So I could read about doctors, people who have published backgrounds, health practitioners. That's the space. As a young person, you see these individuals. It's a space that's highly recognized, and for your story to be shared, it's really huge. I never imagined I would actually be given such a space.

Additionally, another participant noted that the way the interviews were conducted was empowering for young professionals in that all interviewees, no matter their age, were asked similar questions. A participant from Latin America observed:

I see that in the blog, you [FP Voices] are interviewing young people but also kind of old people, and the interview is not different at all. You are asking general questions, and they have to respond. Both of the responses are good and are professional and based in scientific and professional experience.

The reach of FP Voices

Many participants felt that sharing their story would bring increased visibility to their work and their organizations given they perceived FP Voices to have more international reach and wider coverage than they often have access to. One participant from South Asia noted that they shared their story with FP Voices, “for getting recognition for our organization and for the work which I do on a bigger platform, because not many people know about what our organization does in [country].” Another participant from East Africa shared:

It's a space for them to be able to share their work. It's a space for them to be able to get noticed. It's a space for them to be able to not only communicate but share their experiences perhaps with people who have not had the opportunity to get to know them...It's a unique space to be able to communicate your messages, and people get to know who you really are and why you do what you do.

A few participants spoke about using the FP Voices platform and international audience to highlight issues in their countries. For example, a participant from Latin America expressed that they shared their story with FP Voices because, “It was an international platform, and I'm from [country], and with the human rights [violations] that we are currently facing—it was important for me to have a platform to share that in a safe space.”

Some participants recognized perceived the wide reach of FP Voices as an opportunity to amplify the voices of others. Other participants felt that sharing their story with FP Voices was an opportunity to highlight the experiences and stories of others who may not have the opportunity to share. One participant from West Africa shared:

I honestly wish I could go [to the conference] with as many of the girls I was working with as possible, but of course there were a lot of issues, and some of them were under age...I knew it was not possible, but one way to get them there was to be able to share their stories. I was happy to share their stories and, of course, my stories found in their story as well.

A few participants also had their FP Voices stories shared through local media sources in their home countries. For example, a local journalist shared the story of a participant from Latin America in a national newspaper:

Even one journalist from [the country] shared my story. He has a daily mail with all the news in [the country]. Sometimes he recognizes people who are doing important work at the international or national level, and he shared the link [to the FP Voices story] with a story like, “[Participant name] was participating in the congress in [country]. She was amazing. She had this interview, and I want to share it with everybody.” It gave me exposure.

Conclusion



“I love being with young people. When I’m at the office, I’ll be doing the paperwork, but when I’m in the field, I get a chance to meet the people I love so much, the youths from whom I’ve learned a lot, especially in terms of behavior change. Behavior change doesn’t come in one day and you can’t influence behavior change when you’re just in the office but rather to interact with people and try to find a way of enhancing them or influencing them to have positive behavioral change for their health.”

Joseph Kasaija, Uganda

Limitations

This study had several limitations. Most participants shared their story with FP Voices approximately two years before being interviewed for this study; therefore, recall bias is likely. This research cannot be generalized to all young professionals who shared their story with FP Voices or all young professionals in general. Young professionals who were motivated to share their story with FP Voices may be different from those who did not want to share their story and young professionals who agreed to be interviewed for this assessment may have had a more positive experience sharing their story with FP Voices than those who did not agree to an interview. However, among the 22 young professionals that were contacted for an interview, all but three responded. All of the 19 young professionals who responded agreed to be interviewed however, three were over the age of 30 and five were not available for an interview during the study timeframe. Although the sample size was only 11, these findings shed light on the effects of a unique approach to reach and engage young professionals working in FP/RH.

Discussion

Increasing demand for family planning services, specifically for young people, is one of the USAID priority reproductive health goals. Understanding how best to reach young people, support their engagement, and work with young FP/RH professionals can help achieve this goal.

These results show that young professionals working in FP/RH felt validated and recognized when their experiences were documented and disseminated through FP Voices. FP Voices provided young FP/RH professionals a sense of increased visibility within and outside of their networks. These findings suggest that FP Voices can serve as a platform to strengthen the development and the networks of young professionals in FP/RH and serve as a key stepping stone to future career opportunities.

The findings also suggest that the act of telling one's story strengthened the confidence and pride of young professionals in themselves and in their work. Furthermore, the professional portraits helped establish young people as professionals—many of whom had never had a professional portrait made before. The design and execution of the FP Voices initiative, including how stories were collected, displayed, and disseminated, provided young professionals a unique platform through which to share their experiences and stories—something many young people do not have access to. Participants expressed that access to this space helped foster new professional connections and open the door to new opportunities. The inclusion of professional portraits in FP Voices stories added value and credibility to the stories and the platform. Participants also conveyed that reading other people's stories on FP Voices motivated them to continue their work, recognizing that they were not working alone, but alongside the broader global FP community. Participants felt that sharing their stories could inspire other young professionals and emphasize the value and credibility of young professionals to more experienced members of the FP workforce.

Implications and Recommendations

Meaningful youth engagement

Young professionals should be included in the development, implementation, and evaluation of programs that affect them. Strategic, social-media-based storytelling initiatives like FP Voices can help the global health and development community achieve meaningful youth engagement in several ways. Initiatives like FP Voices can amplify the voices and elevate the credibility of young professionals among broad audiences that include peers, donors, decision makers, and program managers. They can strengthen existing connections and help link young professionals with local and international colleagues, projects, and organizations. Initiatives like FP Voices should explore innovative dissemination approaches and networking opportunities to ensure that young professionals' stories are seen by those who may be seeking their support, input, collaboration, and partnership.

Cultivation of young professionals

While FP Voices was not established with the goal of facilitating professional development among young people, the findings of this evaluation show that providing opportunities and platforms for young professionals to showcase their experiences and work can instill a sense of pride and confidence. It can also help them grow and strengthen their professional networks and can lead to new opportunities for professional collaboration and development. Additionally, access to non-traditional professional development opportunities, such as providing access to a professional headshot and to an interview session, can serve as an important aspect of professional development for a young person. Providing channels through which young professionals can share their experiences and insights with those who have been in the workforce longer—and read and listen to the experiences and insights of their more seasoned colleagues around the world—is a valuable form of professional development that is often taken for granted: the sharing of tacit knowledge. Knowledge-sharing initiatives, including FP Voices and others that use storytelling to facilitate the exchange of valuable experiential insights, should cultivate young professionals as a key audience and engage them as both storytellers and story readers.

Ethics of responsible storytelling

Any storytelling initiative has a responsibility to its storytellers to follow ethical principles of consent and fair use. FP Voices not only obtains informed consent at the time of the interview and portrait session; its publication process also ensures that storytellers can review and approve their draft stories prior to publication whenever possible. While FP Voices meets its ethical obligations, the observations of several participants in this study illuminated the personal risks that some FP Voices storytellers make when they make public statements about family planning—a controversial or taboo topic in many places—particularly when their stances diverge from that of their government. While FP Voices tries to be mindful of and sensitive to the potential negative consequences young people might face when speaking publicly about sensitive topics, FP Voices is a U.S.-based initiative whose staff may not be fully aware of the specific socio-political context of each storyteller and the resulting risks each storyteller may be taking by participating in the initiative. In this study, the participants who shared the personal risks they had taken also noted that they would not change their decision to share their story publicly—they felt that the benefits outweighed the risks. Even so, FP Voices and other storytelling initiatives have an ethical responsibility to address this issue in storytelling workshops and interview/portrait sessions, making the possible political and security implications of sharing one's story a part of the informed consent conversation.

Future research priorities

Participants perceived that their stories would inspire and encourage other young professionals and support the recognition of young people as professionals. In order to assess this perception further, we recommend additional research to understand the reach and effect of young professionals' stories on young people in general, including other young professionals between the ages of 18 and 30. Additionally, we recommend future research to assess the effects of young professionals' stories on seasoned professionals—including their reactions to the stories, actions taken after reading the stories, and implications for advocacy and policy change. We also recommend additional research to assess what effects, if any, interaction with FP Voices stories or the platform, could have on policy makers or donors. Additionally, we recommend exploring the potential negative repercussions storytellers could experience from sharing their story with FP Voices in all future FP Voices research in order to further inform ethical storytelling approaches.

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