

ENHANCING MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH SERVICES FOR ADOLESCENT GIRLS & YOUNG WOMEN

THE CASE OF SMART PATHWAYS



BILL & MELINDA
GATES foundation





Smart Start, developed under the Adolescents 360 (A360) initiative, is an innovative approach to adolescent sexual and reproductive health (ASRH) in Ethiopia. Co-designed with young people, it aims to increase contraceptive uptake among married adolescent girls aged 15-19. As of March 2024, Smart Start has helped more than 356,542 girls to voluntarily take contraception of their choice.

While Smart Start prevents maternal mortality by reducing unintended and teenage pregnancies, there is a need for comprehensive, quality care throughout the reproductive journey of adolescent girls and young women (AGYW). Adolescent mothers face higher risks of complications such as eclampsia, puerperal endometritis, and systemic infections, and their babies also face higher health risks. According to the Federal Ministry of Health, the risk of complications is high even among young women, with a reported Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) of 267 per 100,000 live births.

Maternal mortality is driven by multiple factors: low rates of facility-based deliveries, inadequate provider competence, poor quality counseling, insufficient emergency obstetric services, unsafe abortions, obstetric fistula, low early antenatal care (ANC) coverage, substandard ANC services, and inefficient referral systems. Addressing these issues is essential to improving health outcomes for adolescent girls and young women. Research shows that the uptake of four or more antenatal care (ANC) visits and postnatal care (PNC) within the first 24 hours of delivery are critical to reducing maternal mortality. However, there is very low use of ANC and maternal services in Ethiopia. According to the 2019 Ethiopia Mini Demographic and Health Survey (EMDHS), only 32% of pregnant women in Ethiopia receive the recommended four or more ANC visits, and the rate of skilled delivery care remains similarly low.

In 2022, A360 received additional funding to develop a program integrating maternal, newborn, and child health (MNCH) into the existing Smart Start intervention using a human-centered design (HCD) approach. HCD is a problem-solving approach that prioritizes understanding the needs, behaviors, and perspectives of end-users, gathering insights to inform the design and technical strategy. We chose to focus on understanding - from girls' and influencers' perspectives - why ANC utilization was so low and identify opportunities for improvement.

Insight



Limited Pregnancy Planning and Understanding of the Pregnancy Process

Married adolescent girls and young women often view motherhood as a status symbol, influenced by societal expectations and their husbands' desires. This results in limited pregnancy planning and delayed initiation of Antenatal Care (ANC).

"Prenatal planning is not common...There is no planning except maybe educated people in our area. There is no discussion unless a couple is having trouble conceiving."

- Community member

"I was afraid that my friends might talk behind my back, saying that I got pregnant as soon as I got married, went back to the clinic after a month to get vaccines [ANC care] and was fine after that...even the pain stopped." - Girl



Technical Strategy

Develop tools for health workers, influencers, and community members to normalize pregnancy conversations, emphasizing the importance of pregnancy planning and understanding the process. This will empower AGYW and couples with knowledge to make informed decisions, promote healthy life choices, and ensure the well-being of both mother and baby. By providing education on preconception, conception, pregnancy, childbirth, and postpartum care, we enable AGYW/couples to navigate their reproductive journey confidently.



Influence and Decision-Making Dynamics

Husbands significantly influence pregnancy and care decisions, supported by mothers and mothers-in-law who shape their attitudes.

"Where would she bring the money from? Am I not the one generating income?" - Husband

"Her husband is her hero. He is the one who will take her when she is sick or has any signs of sickness. He will also take her on days where the doctor appoints her." - Mother

"There are those that say that mothers used to give birth at home and use that as an excuse to keep a girl from going." -Girl



Couples Counseling: HEWs and WDAs facilitate counseling sessions to improve communication and joint decision-making among couples. This empowers them to make informed choices regarding pregnancy and ANC.



Limited Knowledge and Self-Empowerment

Adolescents lack comprehensive knowledge and confidence to seek pregnancy care, often feeling disempowered without encouragement from experienced individuals.

"I had pain on my left side. I didn't do anything because I thought it would just go away." She added, "There's no one who will listen...because they're not educated, they'll tell me it'll go away." - Girl



Mobilization and Counseling: WDAs mobilize AGYW and HEWs use the Smart Pathways discussion guide to provide essential knowledge and build self-efficacy. This approach empowers AGYW to make informed decisions and take proactive measures for their maternal health.

Insight



Incomplete Understanding of Care Needs and Importance of Nutrition

Girls and their influencers have a limited understanding of the full scope of pregnancy care needs, including ANC and balanced nutrition.

"There are some customary practices that harm girls when they are pregnant. For instance, the girls don't eat when their husbands are away regardless of how long it has been and how hungry they are. They can go for long periods of time feeling hungry and that hurts her health in the long run" - HEW

Technical Strategy

Nutrition Education: HEWs use visual aids like nutrition posters and ANC materials to educate AGYW on necessary supplements, danger signs, and the importance of a balanced diet. Involving husbands in this education enhances support and comprehensive care-seeking behaviors.

Barriers to Accessing Care and Services



Husbands and mothers are often reluctant to support ANC and safe delivery services due to feeling left out, distance to healthcare facilities, and misconceptions about facility deliveries.

"Since the clinic is far away, I gave birth at home." - Girl

"To give birth at the health facility is to be touched inappropriately" - Girl

Proximity and Education: Health posts closer to homes allow for some check-ups. At the same time, Smart Pathways provides clear information about facility deliveries to dispel fears and misconceptions. This empowers AGYW to make informed decisions about their care.

Insufficient Reproductive Health Services



Rushed postpartum family planning (PPFP) discussions and substandard service quality impact subsequent care-seeking behaviors and delivery decisions.

"They told me [about FP] right when I gave birth. When we got back home, we decided. He told me to choose and take whichever method I wanted.". Then she added "My husband spoke to the HEW on the phone and decided. He told me to go to the Health Post to get take a 5 year method. I didn't understand the method options." - Girl

"He'll make the decision for her. He could push her to take family planning, even if she doesn't want to." - Husband

Early Discussions and Quality Services: Smart Pathways initiates family planning and postnatal care (PNC) discussions before delivery, seamlessly integrating these topics into postpartum care plans. This approach builds confidence and trust between service providers and adolescents, enhancing the quality and accessibility of reproductive health services.

SMART PATHWAY INTERVENTION

Building on insights, we developed approaches to create demand for MNCH services using aspirational messaging and engaging communication tools to address ANC barriers. The final intervention, Smart Pathways, supports adolescent girls and young women (AGYW), whether pregnant, planning pregnancies, or at risk of unintended pregnancies, to have the information they need to plan for an have a safe pregnancy. Smart Pathways aims to build relevance for the importance of ANC and enhance self-efficacy, encouraging increased care-seeking behaviors and supporting systems-strengthening approach to meet AGYW's reproductive, maternal, newborn, and child health (RMNCH) needs. Our strategic priorities for expanding RMNCH are designed around the continuum of care, which includes delaying and spacing pregnancies as well as preconception, pregnancy, and postpartum care.



Focus Area 1: Delay and Spacing

This focus area is dedicated to supporting AGYW in making informed decisions about their reproductive health. By expanding Smart Start's age cohort to include 20-24-year-olds, we aim to reach a broader demographic. We're also introducing client-led counseling approaches and empathy training for providers to ensure a supportive environment for these discussions. Additionally, we're developing a digital version of the Smart Start counseling tool to make these resources more accessible.

Focus Area 2: Preconception

In the preconception phase, we aim to equip AGYW with the knowledge they need to prepare for a healthy pregnancy. We've developing a simple nutrition guide that emphasizes the importance of balanced nutrition before and during pregnancy. We're also providing information about early signs of pregnancy to help AGYW recognize these indicators. Furthermore, we're promoting the value of ANC services during pregnancy through targeted messaging.

Focus Area 3: Pregnancy

During pregnancy, our focus shifts to creating demand for ANC and improving the quality of these services. We've developing messaging to educate AGYW about the importance of ANC and proper nutrition during pregnancy. We've also creating client-facing ANC discussion guides to enhance understanding of ANC. Our birth planning tools are designed to help AGYW plan for deliveries with a skilled provider. We're also introducing PFP content during ANC to prepare AGYW for postpartum family planning. Lastly, we're working to strengthen the capacity of health workers and midwives to provide respectful maternal care.

Focus Area 4: Postpartum

Postpartum care is crucial for the mother and the newborn. Our initiatives in this area aim to improve PFP uptake and utilization of PNC services. We're building the capacity of midwives and HEWs to provide PFP and PNC services. We're also ensuring expedient delivery of PFP and PNC after delivery for AGYW, which delivers at a facility. For those who deliver at home, we're activating community structures to mobilize them to receive PFP and PNC at health facilities.

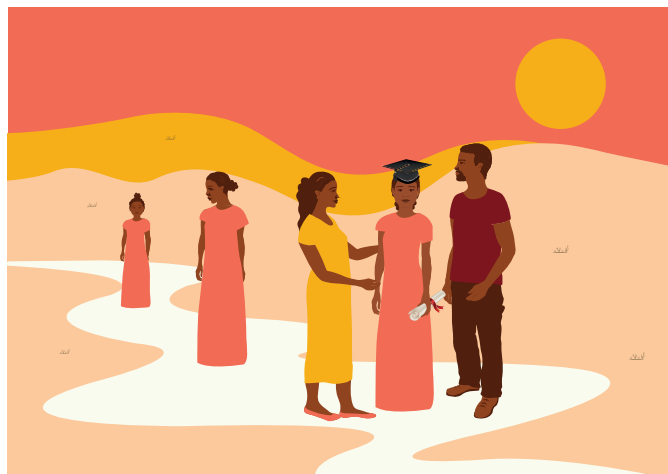
Through these strategic focus areas, we aim to provide comprehensive care throughout AGYW's reproductive journey, addressing their unique needs at each stage. Our goal is to improve reproductive health outcomes and empower AGYW to make informed decisions about their health.

The Smart Pathways approach, a product of the Adolescents 360 (A360) initiative, is designed to offer a comprehensive and innovative strategy aimed at enhancing maternal and child health services for adolescent girls and young women in Ethiopia. This is not only to improve knowledge about nutrition, signs of pregnancy, and danger signs during pregnancy, but also boost service utilization including uptake and visits for Antenatal Care (ANC), Postnatal Care (PNC), and Postpartum Family Planning (PPFP). Furthermore, it fosters an intent to use PPFP and ANC. By addressing key insights and implementing targeted strategies across the continuum of care, we aim to empower these young women, improve health outcomes, and ultimately transform their reproductive journeys.

SMART PATHWAYS DISCUSSION AIDE



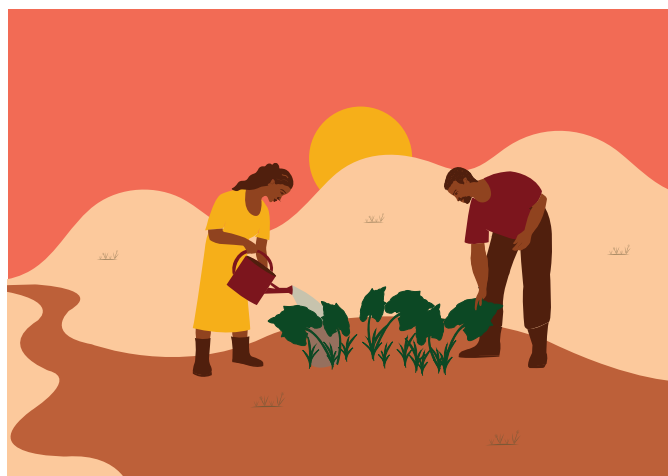
“What do you see here? What do you do before you start planting? What does any farmer do before starting planting?”



“What do you see here? What aspirations do you have for your child? What kinds of things do you want for her/him? What kind of future do you envision?”



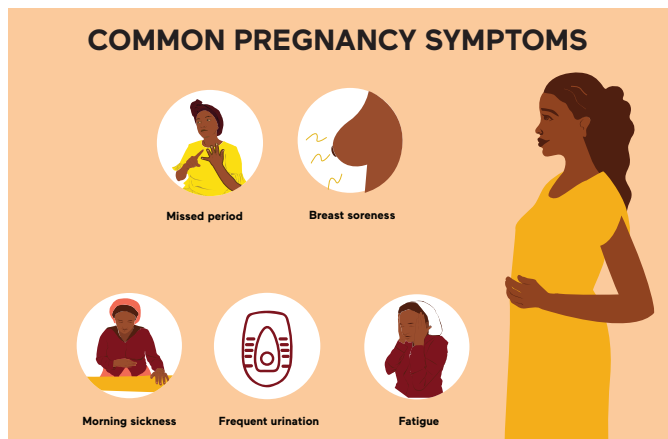
“What do you see here? What do you do before you start planting? What does any farmer do before starting planting?”



“What do you do once a plant has taken root?”



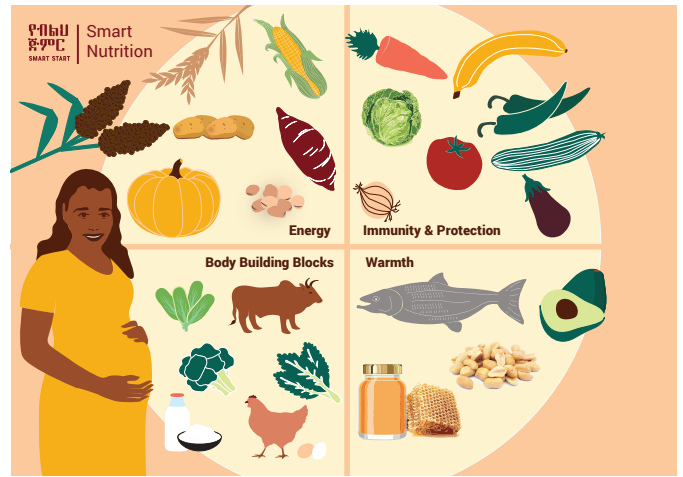
“Imagine how much pride you will feel in a few years, looking at your healthy child and family, because of the choice you made to seek ANC early and consistently today.”



“If this is your first pregnancy, you may not know that you are pregnant. Look at this image. These are the signs of early pregnancy. What do you see?”



“Many changes in your body are likely to be a normal part of pregnancy. However, some signs could point to a more serious pregnancy complication. What do you see here?”



“Why is healthy nutrition very important during pregnancy? what do you think are the foods needed for a healthy and nutritious diet during pregnancy?”



“We have seen the different foods in their categories: Now we will discuss the benefit of foods with our body parts.”



“How you can plan for the health of your family after delivery. What do couples normally prepare or plan for after birth? Spacing children is important for the health of your children.”



“Spacing children is also important for the health of the mom. Moms need at least two years to give their bodies time to heal and become strong again, or their next pregnancy could be risky.”



“In order to space, there are many contraceptive methods that you can get from your health service provider. You can explore what type of contraceptive you want to take after having your baby, and then make an appointment for when to return after delivery, to the Health Post/ Center to get a method of your choice.”

CONTRIBUTORS

Appearing in alphabetic order.

Eba Kebede, MNCH Quality and Training Coordinator, PSI Ethiopia

Fana Abay, Marketing and Communication Director, PSI Ethiopia

Feven Kefale, Graphic Design Officer, PSI Ethiopia

Mary Phillips, Technical Advisor II, A360, PSI

Rahel Demissew (Dr.), Sexual Reproductive Health Director, PSI Ethiopia

Seyoum Atlie, RISE Project Director, PSI Ethiopia

Zenebe Akale, Implementation Manager, AYSRH, PSI Ethiopia





BILL & MELINDA
GATES *foundation*

