UN Volunteers utilize social media to engage young people in the discourse around reproductive rights

Women in South Africa give birth to 2.3 children on average translating to a population growth of 1.6 per cent. While South Africa’s fertility rate is substantially lower than those of other African countries (in Ethiopia, for example, women have an average of 4.2 children), it is also considerably higher than in countries of the Global North where most countries show rates of below two children. At the same time, teenage pregnancies are prevalent with nearly 7 per cent of 15 to 19-year old girls giving birth (in comparison, the UK rate is at just over 2 per cent).

UNFPA’s mission is to to deliver a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every childbirth is safe and every young person’s potential is fulfilled.

The 2018 World Population Day theme honours the role that family planning plays in reproductive rights and health: Family planning is a human right.

Some 176 UN Volunteers served with UNFPA around the world in 2018 and
68 in East & Southern Africa. They contributed particularly as midwives, ensuring healthy births for both mother and child.

In South Africa, two national UN Volunteers with UNFPA in South Africa commit their time and skills in online communications – and particularly social media – to support reproductive health and ensure adequate family planning in the country and the region.

We have been raised in a society where there’s a taboo to talk about sex and intimacy – with older people but even peer-to-peer... Governments, the UN, the private sector – everybody needs to listen to young people more. Otherwise, they will feel irritated and ignored. –national UN Volunteer with UNFPA Sven Meela, South Africa

National Youth UN Volunteer and Social Media Fellow with UNFPA, Sven Meela, explains the challenges of family planning in South Africa: “I think there is a lack of understanding about family planning in South Africa. There is a general rejection to talk about sex. We have been raised in a society where there’s a taboo to talk about sex and intimacy – with older people but even peer-to-peer.”

“This problem does not only persist in South Africa. Governments, the UN, the private sector – everybody needs to listen to young people more. Otherwise, they will feel irritated and ignored.” –national UN Volunteer with UNFPA Sven Meela, South Africa

His colleague and fellow national UN Youth Volunteer Cleopatra Okumu believes that access to and quality of family planning also heavily depends on the economic situation of the individual.

There is a gap between private and public health care. With public health care, you might not get
much information about proper family planning and you don’t get the same quality. However, if you can afford private health care, you have quite a range of options of contraception and you get quality information. --national UN Volunteer with UNFPA Cleopatra Okumu, South Africa

Social media has been hailed as a space enabling particularly young people to connect, interact, and find information.

Both Cleopatra and Sven believe that their assignments as Social Media Fellows can help young people in South Africa gain a deeper understanding of the importance of family planning.

They write tweets, schedule Facebook posts, and monitor website engagement and reach.

We need to be more honest on social media. Instead of UN speak, we need to talk about contraception, abuse – get down to the nitty-gritty. We need to create a social media space of honesty and transparency and bring to light realities. Only with honesty we don’t leave anyone out of the conversation. –Sven Meela

Sub-Saharan Africa

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