



Photo credit: West Africa Breakthrough ACTION Togo

West Africa Breakthrough ACTION Community Empathways Dialogue Results Brief

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Background

Empathways is a card deck activity developed by Breakthrough ACTION to increase empathy among family planning providers for their young clients, thereby encouraging more holistic and youth-centered family planning and reproductive health (FP/RH) service delivery. The West Africa Breakthrough ACTION (WABA) project adapted **Empathways** for use among young and adult community members. The goal of this revised version of the Empathways tool is to increase collective support for youth contraceptive access in Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, Niger, and Burkina Faso.

This brief focuses on the results of a light-touch monitoring effort in Côte d'Ivoire and Togo that WABA conducted with adult community Empathways participants to gauge whether the card deck contributed to reducing social barriers for youth to access FP/RH information and services.

The WABA project utilized the community Empathways cards as part of the multimedia, youth co-led ***Merci Mon Héros (Thank you, my heroes)*** campaign, which encourages adults to overcome taboos to increase youth access to FP/RH information and services. During *Merci Mon Héros* community activities, organizers would play a **testimonial video** to frame the conversation around a specific FP/RH theme or experience, then distribute selected, topical community Empathways cards to pairs of youth and adults to structure pointed conversations.



Activity Methodology and Monitoring

During Empathways community discussions, a young person and an adult are paired together and use the cards as conversation prompts. The conversations occur over four rounds:

1. **Open up** develops rapport and explores the participants' values.
2. **Discover** focuses on factors impacting individuals' FP attitudes, decisions, behaviors, and access within the community context.
3. **Connect** invites joint reflection on fictional youth reproductive FP/RH access scenarios.
4. **Commit** helps participants distill their insights from the Empathways experience, and invites each one—especially adults—to identify what they can do differently to increase informed, voluntary youth FP access in their community.

The deck's final card asks adult participants to commit to taking a specific action to increase youth access to contraceptive and RH information and services in their community.

From April 2022 to February 2023, WABA organized 27 Empathways conversations in Côte d'Ivoire and 24 conversations in Togo. Following these sessions, WABA conducted light-touch monitoring

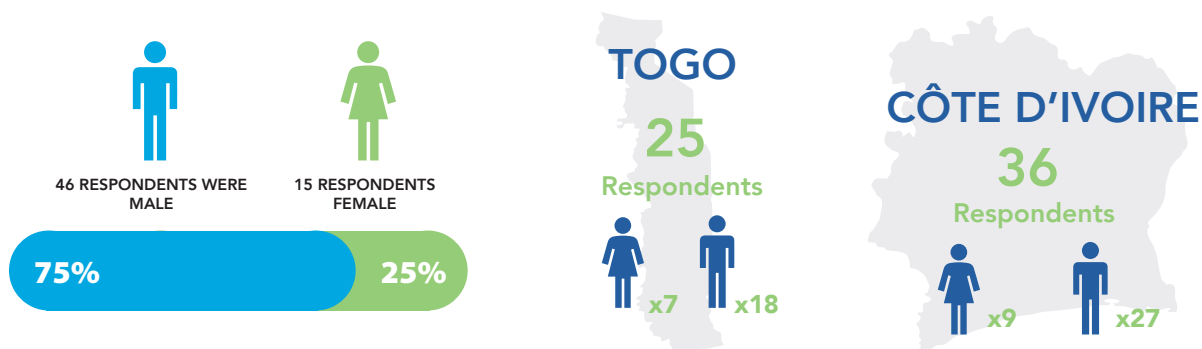
activities with adult participants to better understand whether use of the Empathways deck shifted community members' attitudes and behaviors related to youth contraceptive access. The data were used to quickly understand the potential for the card deck to influence attitudes, norms, and self-reported behaviors.

The monitoring activity was not designed to make conclusive statements about the impact of the activity. Instead, it attempted to understand:

1. Adult participant attitudes and norms related to youth access to FP after participating in the community Empathways conversations.
2. The nature of the commitments that adult participants made following these conversations.
3. The extent to which participants said they followed through on their commitment, approximately one month after they made it.

Data collection

Two WABA youth consultants (one in Mali and in one Burkina Faso) conducted phone interviews with adult men and women in Côte d'Ivoire and Togo who had previously participated in the Empathways conversations and agreed to be contacted for follow up. WABA contacted participants approximately one month after their Empathways activity participation and collected data from 61 adult respondents. Of these, 46 were male and 15 were female. Twenty-five participants were from Togo and 36 from Côte d'Ivoire.



Participant responses to a series of questions were entered into an online form created by WABA, downloaded, and analyzed through basic descriptive statistics in Microsoft Excel.

Results

Participants in Côte d'Ivoire and Togo were asked several questions to assess their attitudes about youth access to FP/RH information and services. They stated their level of agreement with the following statements:

- "Modern family planning is acceptable for unmarried youth to use."
- "Youth who use modern family planning are considered 'bad' by the community."
- "I am confident that I can help a young person access family planning services or methods."
- "I could talk to a young person about family planning."

Key Results

After participating in the community Empathways conversations, of the survey respondents:

- **80%** of women and **100%** of men said it was acceptable for a young person to use contraception.
- **100%** of women and **97%** of men said they were confident that they could help a young person access FP method.
- **73%** of women and **76%** of men fulfilled their commitment to youth.
- **80%** of women and **91%** of men indicated they have recommended contraceptive and FP/RH information and services to youth in their community.

In response to these questions, of the survey respondents:

- **80%** of women and **100%** of men said it was acceptable for a young person to use contraception.
- **73%** of women and **54%** of men disagreed with the statement that “youth who use FP are ‘bad.’”
 - **13%** of women and **41%** of men stated they felt neutral regarding this statement
- **100%** of women and **97%** of men said they were confident they could help a young person access FP methods.
- **100%** of women and **100%** of men said they could talk to a young person about FP.

Commitments

During the community Empathways discussion, participants were encouraged to verbally state an action or behavior they intended to take over the next month to increase youth FP/RH access and use. Data collectors asked participants to share their initial commitment and whether they fulfilled that commitment. This was an open-ended question in the data collection form that was recoded into discrete responses where possible.

During the community Empathways discussions, participants committed to taking the following actions:

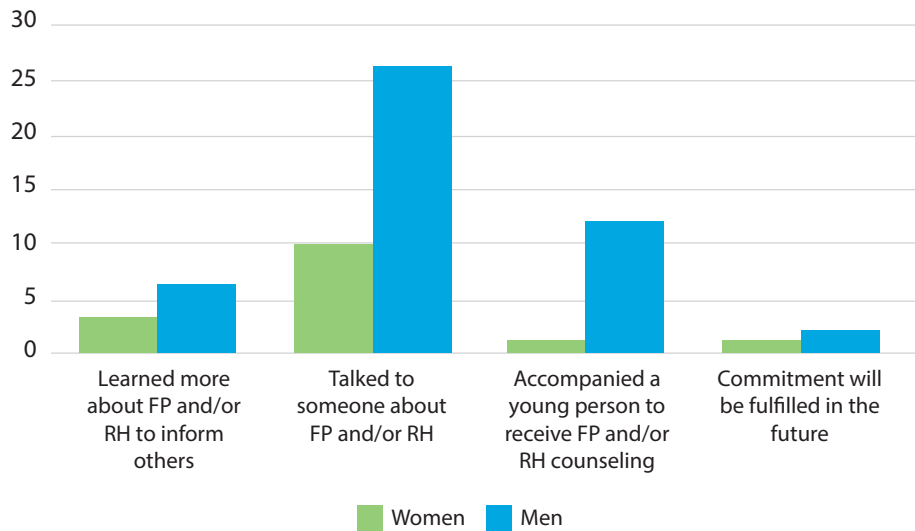
- **86%** of women and **13%** of men surveyed said they would learn more about FP and adolescent RH so they could help others in the community.
- **14%** of women and **24%** of men surveyed said they would accompany a young person to obtain an FP method.

Participant responses showed that:

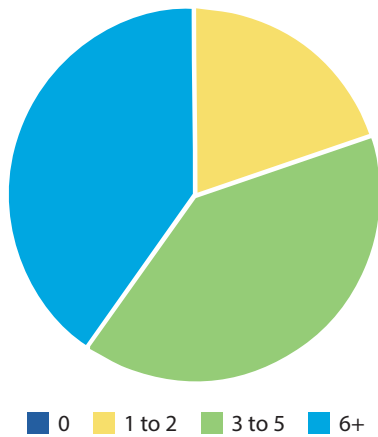
- **73%** of women and **76%** of men fulfilled their commitment.

- **93%** of women and **95%** of men talked to someone about the community Empathways cards.
- Over half (**52%**) of survey respondents talked to **more than six** people about the importance of youth having access to FP.
 - It is noteworthy that, while no women originally committed to talking about FP with young people, many women did report talking to others about the importance of youth FP access.

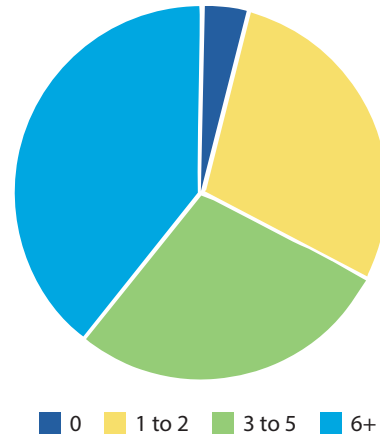
Fulfilled Empathways Commitments



Women by the number of people they talked to about the importance of young people having access to FP



Men by the number of people they talked to about the importance of young people having access to FP



- Of the survey respondents, **80%** of women and **91%** of men said they have recommended FP/RH services and/or FP services to youth in their community after using the community adaptation of Empathways.
 - This is noteworthy because no women originally committed to talking about FP with young people, though they did report later having recommended FP/RH services to youth.

User Feedback

Participants also reported the community Empathways cards:

- Created a dialogue that is rare and typically considered taboo.
- Helped them learn about FP/RH¹ and helped them feel comfortable starting a conversation about these topics.
- Increased the amount of discussion about FP/RH between parents and their children both within and outside of the context of facilitated community Empathways discussions.
- Are a helpful tool in supporting, teaching, and guiding youth.
- Are helpful for teaching adults how to talk to youth about FP/RH.
- Have allowed people to learn and be reflective of their own lives in relation to FP.
- Created a positive experience and provided a good approach to breaking taboos and talking about sensitive topics.
- Have increased participants' enthusiasm about using what they have learned to help others.
- Have increased trust and openness between people.

Country-Level Results

In addition to noting differences by respondent sex, Breakthrough ACTION also assessed responses by country.

Togo

Of the 25 survey respondents in Togo (7 women and 18 men):

Attitudes

- **85%** of women and **100%** of men stated that it was acceptable for young people who were not in a union to use modern contraceptive methods.
- **71%** of women and **44%** of men said that young people who use FP were not considered "bad."
- **100%** of women and **100%** of men said they were confident in their abilities to help a young person access a FP method.
- **100%** of women and men from Togo said they could talk to a young person about FP.

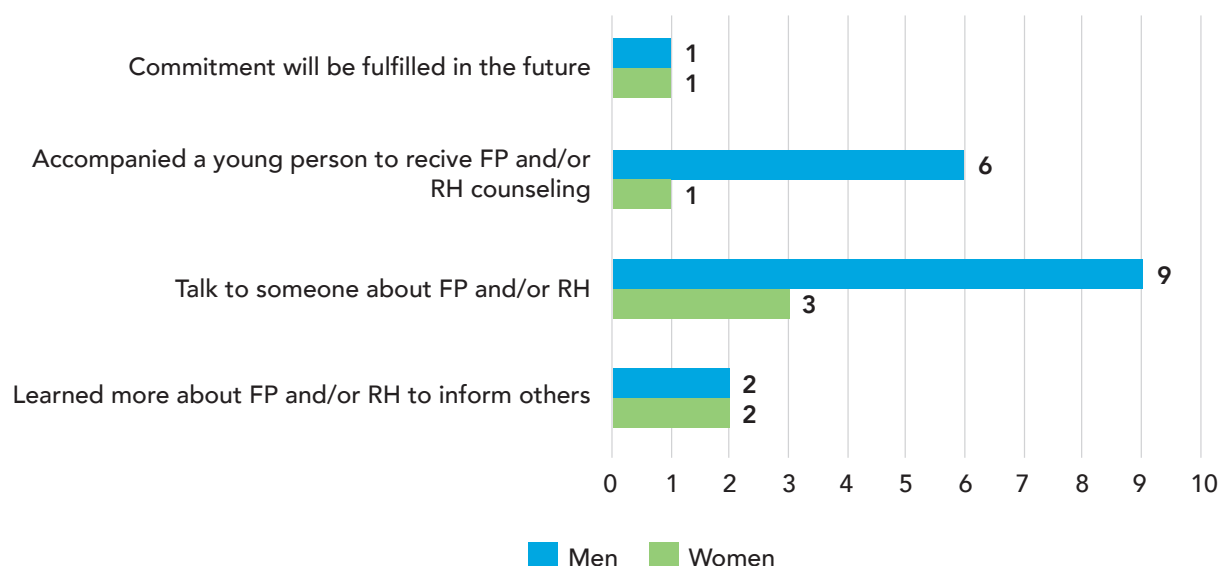
Commitments

- Among both men and women, the most commonly made commitment was to talk to another person about FP/RH.

1 During community Empathways activities, WABA would often take time to define FP/RH, distribute FP method information leaflets, and/or coordinate with the Amplify-FP service delivery project to provide additional information about FP methods.

- **71%** of women and **94%** of men fulfilled their commitment.
- A month after engaging with the Empathways card deck, **85%** of women and **100%** of men reported having talked to another person in their community about their experience using Empathways.
 - **100%** of women and **94%** of men talked to at least one person about the importance of young people being able to access FP. In total, both men and women spoke to three to five young people about FP/RH after participating in Empathways.
 - **71%** of women and **94%** of men recommended FP/RH services to at least one young person after engaging with Empathways. On average, both men and women recommended FP/RH services to three to five young people.

Fulfilled Empathways Commitments in Togo



Côte d'Ivoire

Of the 36 survey respondents in Côte d'Ivoire (9 women and 27 men):

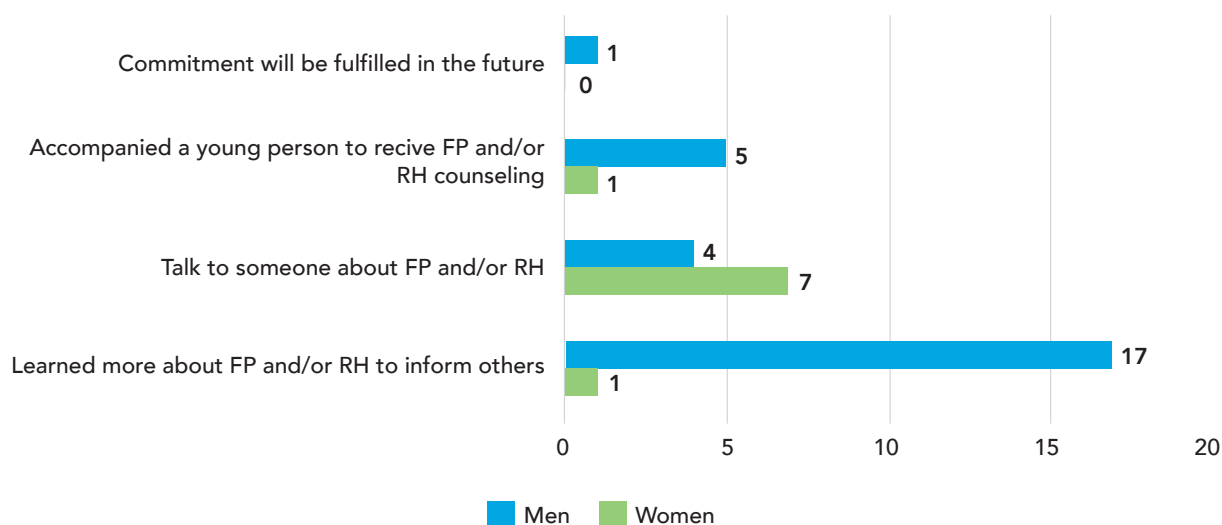
Attitudes

- **77%** of women and **100%** of men agreed it was acceptable for unmarried, young people to use modern contraceptive methods.
- **66%** of women and **60%** of men disagreed with the statement that "young people who use modern FP are considered 'bad' by the community."
- **100%** of women and **96%** of men said that they felt confident helping a young person access a FP method.
- **100%** of both women and men said they could talk to a young person about FP.

Commitments

- The most common commitment among women was talking to a young person about FP and/or RH.
- The most common commitment among men was learning more about FP so they felt better informed to talk to a young person about FP.
- **77%** of women and **96%** of men fulfilled their commitment.
- One month after engaging with Empathways, **100%** of women and **96%** of men had talked to at least one person about their experience.
 - **100%** of women and **96%** of men talked to at least one person about the importance of young people being able to access FP.

Fulfilled Empathways Commitments in Côte d'Ivoire



Potential Implications and Conclusion

The results of this monitoring activity demonstrate the potential effects of a simple tool to facilitate youth access to FP/RH information and services by increasing intergenerational conversations and understanding about youth FP/RH needs at the community level. The prompts in the Empathways card deck help young and adult community members come together and talk about topics often labeled taboo. These conversations prompted compassion and mutual concern that young people need access to FP services and methods.

"I've learned how to talk to young people about reproductive health, especially since I'm a teacher and in constant contact with the students in my class. I've become their confidant."—34-year-old man, Togo

"I got a lot of information from [Empathways] ... I liked the discussions with the other parents and young people, because it's a kind of dialogue you don't often get to see."

—45-year-old woman, Côte d'Ivoire

People who participated in the Empathways community process broadly reported they appreciated that these conversations provided them with an opportunity to learn about FP and RH, reflect on their own experiences growing up, and understand how to initiate a conversation about these topics with youth. They also reported Empathways is an important tool that can guide both youth and adults to improve youth access to FP services and methods and clarified for adult participants why youth FP/RH access is so important.

"As a father, it's only now that I've understood the real need to talk about reproductive health with children. We've been a bit distant from the children because of our occupations, and this discussion has enabled me to question myself. If I'd had a discussion about sexuality with my daughter, she wouldn't be pregnant today at 19 without being married. I ask for support for these types of activities to improve parent-child communication in our context." —53-year-old man, Togo

"These discussions have helped me a lot personally in managing my home and my relationship. In our day, we were afraid of our parents, we hardly dared to talk to them... now, it's my turn to talk to my children about these things." —40-year-old woman, Côte d'Ivoire

The results of the interviews demonstrate that after these conversations, adult participants had high levels of acceptance of FP/RH for youth and a willingness to help youth access FP methods. This is a promising sign of progress towards reducing unintended pregnancies and improving RH outcomes.

"Young people are afraid of their parents' reactions; there's a lack of communication between parent and child. During our discussions with my [Empathways] partner, we came up with a number of ways to talk to the parents, especially the mother."

—36-year-old man, Côte d'Ivoire

In addition, the results demonstrate that after engaging with Empathways, many adult participants were ready to commit to continuing these conversations with youth to increase their access to FP services and methods. This suggests the Empathways community-based intervention may be effective in promoting positive attitudes towards youth access to FP and facilitating conversations about access to FP.

The fact that a majority of participants reported talking to six or more people about the importance of youth having access to contraceptive and FP/RH information and services suggests that components of interpersonal communication, empathy, and verbal commitment associated with the community adaptation of Empathways have the potential to spur additional action from participants. This type of ongoing communication with others may have an exponential effect in reaching adult and youth community members and generating further awareness and engagement around this issue.

There were gender differences in the types of commitments that participants made. In Togo, women were more likely to commit to learning more about FP/RH so they could inform others or talk to someone about FP/RH. Most Togolese men committed to talking to another person about FP/RH or accompanying a young person to receive FP/RH services. In Côte d'Ivoire, most men said they would learn more about FP and/or RH while women committed to talking to someone about FP/RH.

Whether this represents a knowledge gap among men and women by country or an underlying gendered power dynamic is a potential area for exploration in future monitoring or evaluation efforts. In both countries and across men and women alike, the Empathways card game prompted information seeking among adults, discussions with youth, and assisting young people to get to the services or methods they needed.

Overall, these findings highlight the importance of community-based interventions and education programs in promoting positive attitudes and behaviors, facilitating conversation, and increasing youth access to FP services and methods. These light-touch monitoring results indicate the power of face-to-face interactions to overcome disconnects between groups that often experience a sense of mistrust around topics such as FP/RH due to social norms and cultural or traditional practices. The community Empathways card deck provides prompts that can lead to a desire for deepened mutual understanding and support for improved FP/RH access and outcomes.

The Empathways card deck fills a programmatic gap and addresses an intergenerational social need for discussion prompts to overcome taboos and talk more openly about youth FP/RH needs. Feedback and monitoring efforts highlight Empathways' potential to positively shift individual attitudes and behaviors to be more supportive of youth contraceptive access. By engaging directly with community members and community leaders, there is also a potential for the messages promoted through Empathways to gain a level of "social contagion" among relevant reference groups, which is essential to shifting norms.

Learn more about the Empathways tools and how other projects have used and tailored them to different contexts and health areas.

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