

Straight Talking Big Sisters: Expanding access to sexual and reproductive healthcare for young people in the Democratic Republic of Congo

The challenge

Only 10% of adolescent girls in the DRC have their contraceptive needs met

The DRC has a young and growing population. By 2030, adolescents aged 10–19 will have increased by 64% to 28.6 million. The proportion of adolescent girls using contraception in the DRC remains low compared to the African average: an estimated 10% of adolescent girls in the DRC have their contraceptive needs met.

With an estimated population of 17 million, Kinshasa, the capital of DRC, is the second most populous and dense city in sub-Saharan Africa. A 2020 study found that just 10% of girls aged 15–19 years in the city were using a modern contraceptive method, with 13% using a traditional method. This situation leads to many unplanned pregnancies: an estimated 80% of pregnancies among adolescents in Kinshasa were unintended compared with 53–67% for older age-groups. Amongst this age group, the proportion of pregnancies ending in abortion is higher than in any other age bracket.



What we did

Straight-talking Big Sisters support adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights

MSI worked with the design agency, ThinkPlace, to use human-centred design to develop solutions to expand access to information and services. The resulting ‘Straight Talk’ approach consists of three key elements:

- 1** Youth-targeted communications, events, and branding: “Nothing but the truth”. The Straight Talk (Bosolo Nde, in Lingala) communications materials and events leverage a frank and open tone to engage adolescents and youth.
- 2** MSI Big Sisters: Peer mobilisers. Being only slightly older than the adolescents who they are supporting, and coming from the same communities, they are well placed to support young girls struggling with questions and fears about sex. The MSI Big Sisters are visible in the community, speaking to adolescents wherever they can find them: in schools, at water points, bars, and hairdresser salons.
- 3** Youth responsive service delivery: Big Sister activities are co-ordinated with a team of mobile service providers, the MSI Ladies who provide youth-friendly counselling and a full range of contraceptive methods.

Key learnings

Young people in DRC struggle to access the sexual and reproductive health and rights information and services they need to make their own reproductive choices.

Under the FCDO funded WISH project, MSI DRC used human-centred design to better understand the needs of adolescents in the capital Kinshasa and develop solutions to expand access to sexual and reproductive health services and information.

The resulting ‘Straight Talk’ approach saw a 53% increase in the numbers of adolescents accessing contraception with MSI Ladies (mobile service providers) during the pilot.

The approach included the recruitment, training, and support of Big Sister peer mobilisers to run community-based activities to promote agency, build awareness among young people of sexual and reproductive health and rights, and connect youth with quality, client-centred services.



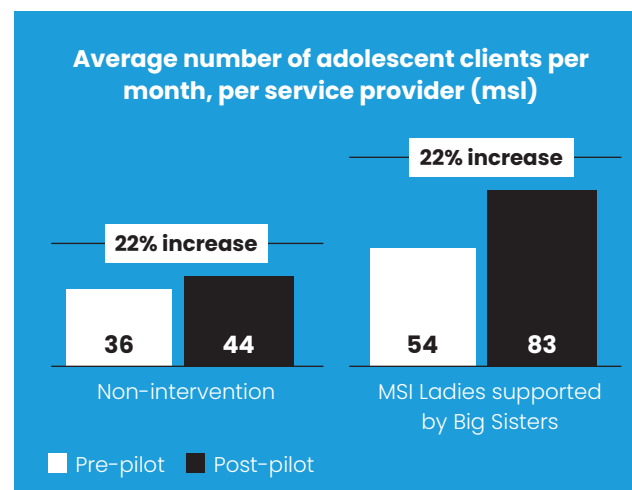
What we found

The Straight Talk intervention is effective at connecting adolescents with services and information tailored to them. During the pilot, MSI Ladies supported by the MSI Big Sisters saw a 53% uplift in the number of adolescent clients and a 25% uplift in overall client numbers.

The MSI Big Sister peer mobiliser model is an excellent way to reach adolescents: their profiles make them trusted and relatable sources of information for young people. This allows them to truly be big sisters to adolescents in their community.

The tone of the brand, materials, and activities resonated well with adolescents, drawing young people in. The interpersonal communication materials captured the concerns most salient to adolescents and worked as ice-breakers. Data showed that when they used the Straight Talk approach, the MSI Big Sisters made more referrals for services compared to when the tools were not used. The MSI Big Sisters said they found the ‘truth cards’ (cards with questions encompassing a range of sexual health topics) helpful in starting conversations with adolescents on sensitive issues. While organising the Straight Talk events took more effort, these were successful in reaching large numbers, and an effective way to connect people with MSI Ladies’ services.

With visible branding and strong spokespeople, the MSI Big Sisters reached a wider community audience than just adolescents. As more people are exposed to the messages, this could be the start of broader change, making the desire and need for contraception among adolescents clearer and more accepted in the community. The MSI Big Sisters were successful in establishing their profile and visibility in the communities they work in, with community members calling them “Ba yayas ya Bosolo nde”: “the Straight-Talking Big Sisters”. The events the Big Sisters organised drew in a wide audience. Anecdotally, as they were all exposed to the Straight-Talking Big Sisters, more community members seemed to accept that contraception is important for unmarried adolescents as well. As the pilot continued, the Sisters were approached by mothers who asked them to talk to their adolescent daughters.



“The Big Sisters become like friends... we have their contact details and can call them if we have any concerns”

Adolescent, Kinshasa

What this means

Peer to peer approaches are a powerful way to engage young people and address their specific needs for information. Taking the time to build a good working relationship between peer mobilisers and the service providers they refer to leads to stronger results.

Recruiting the right profile of peer mobiliser is worthwhile but can take time and effort. MSI DRC found using different channels, including social media; asking for recommendations from existing community mobilisers; and connecting with existing youth organisations were effective in finding the right profile of candidates. Setting up peer support mechanisms helps increase the impact of peer mobilisers.

To ensure peer capacity building, the team set up a WhatsApp group for the MSI Big Sisters where they could share their experiences and challenges.

The Straight-Talking Big Sisters programme is now being scaled across MSI DRC’s activities and MSI is integrating these insights to strengthen our approach to expanding access to adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights.

More information

For more information on MSI Reproductive Choices and the work that we do, please contact:

T: +44 (0)20 7636 6200 E: evidence@msichoices.org. Alternatively, visit our website: www.msichoices.org