LIFE CHOICES

Improved sexual and reproductive health and rights for all individuals especially for young people within the ages 12-30 in the Northern and Volta regions of Ghana.
The key findings of 2014 Ghana Demographic and Health Survey (GDSH) indicate that 14% of women ages 15-19 have begun childbearing: 11% have had a live birth and 3% were pregnant at the time of the interview. The proportion of teenagers who have begun childbearing rises rapidly with age, from 1% at age 15 to 31% at age 19. Teenagers residing in rural areas (17%) and with no education (23%) and those in the second wealth quintile -Northern and Volta Regions- (21%) tend to start childbearing earlier than other teenagers (GDHS, 2014).

In addition, the report also indicated that 23.4% of young women between ages 15 and 24 and 32.3% of young men in the same age categories in the urban areas of the country had comprehensive knowledge of HIV preventive methods. Only 15.9% and 21.6% respectively of young women and men ages 15-24 in rural areas of Ghana knew accurate methods of preventing HIV infection (GDSH, 2014).

The Life Choices project sort to mitigate all these challenges by adopting strategies that increased young people's access to SRHR information and services through innovative radio drama and community engagement that empowered young people to make right choices regarding their sexual life.

**Goal**
Improved sexual and reproductive health and rights for all individuals especially for young people within the ages 12-30 in the Northern and Volta regions of Ghana.

The project had the following objectives;

- To contribute to the reduction of negative cultural practices that limit young people's access to SRHR information and services.
- To increase access to SRHR information and services for young people in hard to reach communities.
- Increase advocacy at the community and Regional level for SRHR education for young people.
Implementation

The Life Choices Project adopted a two-pronged approach towards improving the SRHR situation of young people: the use of radio drama and creating a supportive environment by using community leaders and champions to do advocacy. The project engaged young people between the ages of 12-18 to produce drama on SRH based on recommended CSE manuals (My World and My Life and The World Starts With). The project was implemented in the Northern and Volta Regions of Ghana. The drama had 24 episodes and was recorded and aired in the local language to meet the needs of the target group who were out of school young people and parents. Through the project, community champions were identified in the communities to engage the elders, religious leaders, chiefs, and other relevant groups, to support young people listen to the weekly radio education programme and call in to seek further clarification or share experiences. They also educated communities to support young people to have access to SRHR information and services.

The drama was aired on ABC Radio in the Tamale Metropolis and Global FM in the Volta Region. The drama series was complemented with panel discussions from SRHR experts which gave opportunity to listeners to call in and make contributions and to seek for clarifications on issues that they had challenges comprehending. Callers and listeners were also linked to Savana Signatures’ SHE+ Call centre to speak directly with a health professional to counsel them on their SRHR related issues. It also gave parents the opportunity to learn best practices in handling SRHR discussions with their children.

Achievements

- The radio drama series reached more than 7000 young people with SRH information and education.
- Increased utilization of SRH information (89%) by young people and communities.
- Increased confidence of 81% of young people to access SRH services.
- In total, 23 community champions were identified in 12
communities with 15 of them being men and 8 being women. Their role brought together key gatekeepers and community champions in the project communities for advocacy towards sexuality education.

- Increased community and parental support for CSE for young people in 12 communities.

**Lessons Learnt**

- The use of radio drama has proven to be the best approach when it comes to delivering sexuality education to out of school young people. This is because almost every home has a radio set and the radio stations have a wider coverage.

- It is important to ensure that all radio programmes targeting out of school young people should factor in the issue of language. One key success factor for the Life Choices project was the use of the local language in the radio drama series. Most of the out of school young people who need CSE most have never been to school or dropped out in basic school and so are unable to comprehend information given to them in English language.

- It is also a best practice to create a platform where young people can call in and contribute to the discussion and to ask resource persons on the panel questions on issues that need clarification.

- Engaging community champions to facilitate community support is a good practice, they develop a sense of ownership for the project and can relate well with the needs of their communities and advocate for education.
Alhaji Amadu Saaka, Community Champion of Savana Signatures’ Life Choices project

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Change Stories

Alhaji Amadu Saaka, is the PTA Chairman for the Yapei Presbyterian Junior High School and an active community champion. He alluded to the fact that prior to the implementation of Life Choices, parents didn’t consider talking about sex or sexuality with their children. "we didn't consider having sex related discussions with our children. In view of this, our children couldn't approach us to discuss their sexual problems". He also praised the project for the training parents received which taught them how to better relate with their children. According to Alhaji Amadu, Life Choices has educated parents on the effects of burdening their children with too many chores at home which has an effect on their ability to adequately prepare for school.

Before the project implementation, the school recorded high rates of teenage pregnancy, but that situation has changed and the number has greatly reduced. Also, girls who got pregnant before this programme and were unable to continue with their education have been reintegrated into school to continue their education.

"Through the Life Choices project, we can count two (2) to three (3) girls who mistakenly got pregnant, gave birth and have come back to continue with their education. Now they are in Senior High School" he said.

To deter the children from engaging in promiscuity, he said, the chief and elders of the community have come up with a bye law in the community that sets punitive measures for a school boy who impregnates a school girl, "he will be asked to stay at home till the girl gives birth and is ready to go back to school."
so they continue their education together". This he said has deterred the children from engaging in promiscuous activities.

"Through this project, the children themselves have come to the realization that, if they take education seriously, they will be the ones to benefit from it", Alhaji Amadu Saaka concluded.

Abdul Kabir, Headmaster of Yapei Presbyterian JHS &
community champion for Savana Signatures’ Life
Choices project

Abdul Kabir is the headmaster of Yapei Presbyterian Junior High School. He is also the community champion for Savana Signatures Life Choices project.

According to Kabir, before the introduction of the project, he and others had the perception that Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) issues were not to be discussed publicly. "We usually feel that such issues are private and should be treated as such. So, we always find it difficult discussing them. But with the coming of this project that perception is gradually changing", he said.

Abdul Kabir said he was given a lot of training concerning SRHR, including workshops organized by Savana Signatures on effective ways of addressing SRHR needs and related issues of children when they arise; how to answer appropriately to these adolescents and teenagers (students) when they ask questions related to the subject.

He further added that, after the training, he had a meeting with some stakeholders; parents and other community members, to develop a plan on how to bring together the entire community, so that all parents will benefit. "We started it from the school level, where executives of the PTA and other stakeholders came together for us to develop a plan on how to get all parents on board.". He said.
"In view of this, we organized a community durbar to educate parents that, sexuality education is not something that should be avoided. It should rather be seen as an area that is the responsibility of parents to educate their children about. We got them to understand that, it is every parent's responsibility to sit with their children to find out what their problems and needs are and then find solutions or advise them accordingly."

"Before this project, we used to record many drop out cases due to teenage pregnancy. With the introduction of this project, we haven't recorded any. This is because all the children are deeply involved in the project, where they have learnt a lot about their sexuality", Kabir concluded.

Isshaku Abdul Rashid acknowledged that, as a facilitator, he was given vigorous training by Savana Signatures on how to handle the sexual and reproductive problems or matters of his students.

Counting the success stories of the project, he said, "before I came to this school, there was a high incidence of teenage pregnancy. But with the help of the Life Choices project, I can confidently say that, the project has reduced the rate of teenage pregnancy in this school."

He again added that, "the concept of including parents to the project has been very beneficiary."
This is because most parents, before the introduction of the project had problems talking to their children back home about sexual reproductive health. Traditionally, parents have the notion that, discussing sexual matters with their children rather spoils them. But through some series of training with the parents, that perception is gradually fading away”. He said.

He concluded by saying, "We the teachers even integrate the project with the normal academic curriculum We also live exemplary lives for the students to see. If we didn't live responsible lives, we wouldn't have been where we are today".

Fuseini Aminu is a teacher of Sambo Junior High School and a community champion. In 2012, when he was newly posted to Sambo Junior High School, Fuseini realized there was a high rate of teenage pregnancy in the community which affected the school greatly.

"Then, each time we went on vacation and reopened, we recorded a number of teenage pregnancies. In view of this we decided to, as part of the project, act a Play on teenage pregnancy and its negative effects."

According to Fuseini, parents and the whole community were invited to come and watch the play.
He concluded by saying, "through this programme, the students now know about their sexuality, what contraception is, how to use a condom and even how to use the pregnancy test kit".

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Touching on the benefits and what he learnt from the drama, Abukari said, "During the play, a lot of people, particularly, me, were so much educated that, I realized as a parent I needed to do more as far as taking care of my children both at home and in school. As the play progressed, we the parents, begun to see the consequences of not having time or not taking good care of our children."

He continued saying, "what interested me most was, when the
health worker was invited to talk about teenage pregnancy. The health worker gave detailed information on the preventive measures and safe abortion".

Highlighting on the feedback from the community regarding the Play and the talk, he said, "some community members were of the view that, this is just a way to negatively influence the children. But some others and myself thought otherwise. We asked that, more of such programmes should be organized in order to help reduce teenage pregnancy in our community".

He concluded by saying "at the end of the play, I realized that as parents, it is very important we take good care of our children, especially, by not being negligent in our duties as parents and leaving the children to do whatever they want".

Yussif Sambo is a student of Sambo Junior High School. He says he has benefited a lot from the Life Choices project, "before the introduction of this project I did not know anything about my sexuality and how to ensure personal hygiene, but through this programme, I have learnt a lot about my sexuality, how to prevent teenage pregnancy and STI's and how to keep myself clean", he said.

Yussif added that "it would have been an excellent program if boys and girls are made to listen to the programme with guidance and support of parents. I have witness a girl who was to get her menses,
she had no idea about how to treat herself and thought it was something bad. This program will help girls understand this process and know how to manage it. This program is very beneficial to the community and people and should be continued."

He continued," Thanks to the introduction of this project, I am able to educate my fellow students and even the entire community about teenage pregnancy and its prevention, as well as personal hygiene. I usually do this through the drama we organize at the school. As I am always a character in the drama, I am able to educate the audience."

Kwame Tisim is a year 3 Junior High School student. He played a character in the drama entitled, "Teenage Pregnancy". He played the antagonist responsible for impregnating a young girl in the Play. He further persuades the girl to visit a local "medicine man" for drugs to abort the pregnancy. Due to the unsafe abortion, the girl dies.

Kwame learnt a lot from the drama he partook in, he learnt that, it is good to abstain, but also important to use a condom if it becomes absolutely necessary. "I have also learnt about safe abortion", he added.
Abdul – Majeed Shakira is a form one (1) student of Sambo Junior High School. She is also a character, (teenage girl) who gets pregnant in a play titled "Teenage Pregnancy".

"I am the girl who gets pregnant in the play. My father won't give me money for my upkeep and my personal needs. I therefore go to school hungry. I meet a boy in school who usually gives me money to buy food. Because I didn’t want to lose the money he has been giving me, I couldn’t say no, anytime he asked for sex", She said.

"Unfortunately, I got pregnant", she continued. "The boy asked that, I have an abortion. He therefore takes me to a traditional 'medicine man', instead of a health facility. The 'medicine man' prepares some concoction and gives it to me to drink. I begin to feel serious stomach pains afterwards. I lose my life as a result of severe stomach pains and excessive bleeding".

Speaking on the benefits and lessons she learnt from the play, Shakira concluded by saying, "parents should take care of the needs of their wards and constantly give them money for their upkeep, especially money for lunch in school. It has also thought parents how to take care of their wards so they do not end up like me in the play. Another important lesson I learned is how to protect myself from teenage pregnancy."
Mohammed Zachariah, a National Service Personnel and listener of the "Chat Time" radio program.

Mohammed Zachariah is a regular listener and caller on the "Chat Time" radio program. He commended Savana Signatures for the initiative and expressed his gratitude for the opportunity it gave him to learn and express himself on the radio program. "I think this drama series should continue. I have benefited a lot from it". He admitted that despite being an adult, there were several issues he was ignorant about but through his exposure to the radio programme he has had a change in his attitude.

"I think this program should continue and I pray that sponsors come on board so this program can continue. I always made it a point to gather my children to listen to the program anytime it was being broadcast. A few times I called in and gave the phone to my children to also contribute", he added.

Zachariah in his conclusion said, "The programme is very beneficial because, it is broadcast in Dargani, which is the mother tongue. Therefore, many people clearly understand the messages".

The "chat time" radio programme is an SRHR radio drama programme by Savana Signatures on ABC Radio in Tamale. It is targeted at young people to educate and guide them to make the right choices concerning their sexuality. It also educates and guides parents on how to handle their children's SRHR issues. The program has a total of 24 Episodes with a 6-month (June to December) duration. It was broadcasted in two Ghanaian languages; Dagbani and Ewe.

Mohammed Zachariah, since the beginning of this programme, has been a listener of the radio program. He mostly called into the programme to give his comments and contributions.