MY FUTURE, MY CHOICE
Increasing Young People's Access to Contraception
Birhan Gebre, a young woman from the city of Adigrat, Ethiopia, grew up one of six children. When she was married at eighteen, Birhan and her husband agreed to wait a while before having kids of their own. “But pills had some side effects on me,” says Birhan, who is now twenty. She remembers the monthly trips to the health center being a real expense, costing her family time and money. There had to be a better option.

“I heard about long-acting methods on television,” remembers Birhan. Then with the help of the Integrated Family Health Program, led by Pathfinder, she received knowledge and counseling on a variety of contraceptive methods. “We received education at the health center and in the kebele (community) during women’s meetings.”

In Ethiopia, only five percent of young women (ages 15–19) report using a contraceptive of any type. One in three women have had their first child by the time they are 18 years old. But Birhan and her peers learned they don’t have to become statistics. They have options.

Implants and Adolescents, a Good Match?

Young people face particular obstacles that make them less likely to use short-acting methods, such as pills or condoms, consistently, or to use contraception at all. These include a lack of information on how to use contraception effectively, unpredictable sexual activity among those that are unmarried, and community norms that don’t support adolescents’ use of contraception.

Given these factors, implants are particularly suitable for many young people who want to delay pregnancy for a couple of years, or space their next birth. After a small contraceptive rod is inserted under the skin of a young woman’s arm, the implant lasts for 3–5 years. It does not interfere with sex, and no daily action is required.

So What’s the Problem?

Restrictive policies, misconceptions, and stigma—on the part of both providers and the community—often limit young people’s access to highly effective contraception.
In Ethiopia, more than 4.7 million young people accessed youth-friendly sites for information and services, including contraception, through a Pathfinder-implemented program.
effective long-acting methods. Here’s where Pathfinder comes in.

“Before the training, we wrongly assumed that this type of contraceptive was relevant only for older women and those who have started giving birth,” says Genet Desta, a clinical nurse at Adigrat Health Center. Since 2009, across six regions of Ethiopia, Pathfinder has supported the Ethiopian Ministry of Health by training clinical care providers in long-acting contraception. We have trained them to provide quality counseling services—to help dispel common myths about contraception, and long-acting methods in particular, and to deliver information and services adolescents and youth need, free from judgment and bias.

“As I got special training on implants and IUDs,” says Genet, “I became aware that long-acting methods are appropriate for adolescent girls. More girls, especially the ones who go to the university, prefer these options. They can avoid the burden of traveling to the health centers again and again. I think the adolescent girls choose this method because they believe it doesn’t affect the probability of pregnancy in the future.”

Implants are not only effective, they are completely reversible. As soon as the implant is removed, a woman’s fertility returns. When Birhan heard this—that she has the ability to get pregnant when she and her husband decide they are ready—she made her choice.

“My husband is very happy, and we have decided together to use this method. Our families even know we use an implant and they are all supportive.”
This Is Change

Pathfinder was one of the first organizations to address the unique sexual and reproductive health needs and interests of young people. We have implemented projects in more than 30 countries, guided by the core belief that sexual and reproductive health is fundamental for young people to realize their full potential and lead healthy, free, productive lives. Always, this means they must have information on and access to a full range of contraceptive options.

As this issue of Pathways will show you—we are not alone in this belief. Women like Genet and Birhan in Ethiopia are sharing their powerful experiences. National governments are taking action. Youth in Mozambique, and across the world, are shaping the sexual and reproductive health programs they want and need. These are our partners, and their words speak for themselves:

“I believe the availability of different types of contraceptive methods is an advantage,” says Birhan. “So you can choose the method that is comfortable for you and make your own decision.”

Want to take action? Read a blog from Dr. Candace Lew, Pathfinder’s Senior Technical Advisor for Contraception, and join the global conversation on sexual health, rights, and contraception for young people at www.pathfinder.org/WCD2013
Text “1” for Knowledge! Using Cell Phones to Talk about Sex

With more than 45 percent of people under the age of 15, Mozambique has one of the youngest populations in the world. For two decades, Pathfinder has worked with adolescents and youth in Mozambique. We recognize the obstacles they continue to face—pregnancy at an early age and low uptake of contraception. But we also see a new opportunity to reach them.

Today, more Mozambicans are using mobile phones than ever before. What if we could use these phones to give youth accurate information about contraceptives in a way that makes the most sense to them? We can.

This month, Pathfinder is launching mCenas!—Mozambique’s first ever text message campaign to provide contraceptive information to youth. To mark this occasion, we asked Pathfinder’s Senior Project Manager for mHealth, Marion McNabb, to share her five favorite parts of this innovative text message campaign.

1. “Without a doubt, the stories.”
What is more compelling—a list of facts or a rich, personal story? We at Pathfinder know that to address the range of challenges youth face in seeking contraception, we cannot just throw facts at them. They need to be engaged. So in addition to sending youth text messages with information about contraceptives, mCenas! will text them captivating stories about fictional characters dealing with sex and reproduction.

On a regular basis (three times a week, for three months) youth will receive text messages about “Ema,” whose boyfriend wouldn’t wear a condom. Ema is afraid she’s pregnant and doesn’t know what to do. With each text message, the character’s story unfolds—Ema learns she’s not pregnant and her older sister tells her the truth about contraception. Then she gets an IUD at the clinic. In the end, Ema will choose a new boyfriend, Edu. Edu is awesome and responsible. He will wear a condom.

2. “We use their voices.”
Pathfinder found a local scriptwriter who has experience with young people and even local youth texting slang. Then we tested the stories with the youth themselves to make sure the messages spoke to them—LOLs, 😄, and all.

3. “It’s incredibly interactive.”
At any time, youth can access a menu to request information on a whole host of topics that matter to them, from contraceptive implants to masturbation to HIV. But they can also reply to texts to learn more. Remember when Ema got her IUD? At that point in the story, youth will receive a second message—“Want to learn more about IUDs? Just reply ‘1,’ and information will instantaneously be sent to their phones.

4. “We tailored our messaging for special groups.”
At the start of the project, Pathfinder conducted 15 small group sessions with youth. We asked them to draw on their experiences to tell us—what stops young people like you from using contraception? Here’s what we found out: while a lack of accurate information is a major obstacle for everyone, young parents face very different barriers than youth who have not had children.

How could we make sure both groups receive texts with information relevant to them? If we didn’t, we knew we would fail. So Pathfinder created two stories, two custom mCenas! experiences—one for young parents, one for youth without children.

5. “It’s just one piece of the puzzle.”
Unlike many mHealth programs that have come before, mCenas! is not a standalone campaign. Pathfinder knows text messages alone cannot meet the complex needs of youth. So we have fully integrated mCenas! into one of our existing health projects—the Extended Service Delivery/Family Planning Initiative project.*

This means youth will have real people to talk to—the 577 providers and 336 youth peer educators we’ve trained. It means, with their phone in their hand, they can choose the contraceptive method that is right for them, then walk into a Pathfinder-supported clinic to get it.

Want to see mCenas! in action and hear more from our mHealth expert, Marion McNabb? Check out our photo blog at www.pathfinder.org/mcenas.

*mCenas! is part of Pathfinder’s youth strategy under the Extended Service Delivery/Family Planning Initiative, supported by USAID.
Dear Pathfinders,

This year, you walked the walk. Whenever Pathfinder—and the people we serve—needed you, you took action.

Whether it meant writing to your Representative for increased US funding for global health or a repeal of the Global Gag Rule, you stepped up. When we asked you to stand with Peace Corps volunteers to ensure their equal access to health care coverage, you stood proudly. Every step of the way, you made your voices heard! And despite our very difficult political climate, we made progress.

Because of your advocacy, earlier this summer, the Senate Appropriations Committee approved a strong bill to fund US foreign assistance programs over the next year. Now we need to make sure your Senators bring this bill to the Senate floor for a vote.

Why do we need the Senate Bill?

• It will fund global health programs for international family planning, maternal and child health, and HIV and AIDS at nearly $670 million—$210 million more than the similar bill in the House of Representatives;

• The bill allows abortion coverage for Peace Corps volunteers in the cases of life endangerment, rape, and incest—making the law consistent with the coverage available to all other federal employees and beneficiaries.

• The bill permanently repeals the Global Gage Rule, which denies US family planning assistance, such as condoms and contraceptive supplies, to any overseas organization that uses its private funds to provide abortion-related information, referrals, or services. This harmful policy restriction has impeded the delivery of contraceptives to hundreds of thousands of people in the developing world, and would be unconstitutional if applied to US organizations.

We have fought too hard to give up now. Please help us ensure that the bill receives a vote. Email, call, and write your Senators to tell them to bring S.1372 to the floor. Then, call your Representative to ask for improvements to their bill, HR 2855. We must ensure that global health funding levels remain strong. Harmful, ideologically-driven policy restrictions—that would restrict access to contraception—should have no place in the bill that will go to the President for his signature.

Thank you for your commitment and dedication to working for positive change for women everywhere. You are making a difference! Don’t stop now.

Jonathan J. Rucks
Director of Advocacy
A Homegrown Commitment to Youth

Channeling a local passion to create global change

Last month, Valerie Spencer happily watched her daughter get married. "It means a lot to me that my children have the ability to make their own life choices," she says. That’s why Valerie supports Pathfinder’s work to empower young women with sexual and reproductive health care, including contraception.

“It’s really about human rights. If a girl has a baby at 15, how can she fully participate in school? And what about the boy who impregnates her? What about his future?” For Valerie, this is more than a women’s issue. Valerie also has a son and knows young men have a big role to play.

“It goes beyond my personal experience with daughters. I see my son in the same light. He needs to be responsible and in control of his decision of when to start a family.”

Valerie has spent years supporting local causes that empower young people in her native Minnesota, a state where the “ethos of philanthropy” is alive and well. “Giving back is ingrained in the state’s culture,” she says. Eventually, she chose to expand her impact by focusing her energy internationally —where the need is also great.

Pathfinder was the perfect fit. While Pathfinder’s community-based approach appealed to Valerie, it was our work with young adolescents and young married couples that resonated with her.

“I really like that Pathfinder focuses on the boys and the girls and the young married couples, who often fall through the cracks,” she says. “Let’s keep working with these young married couples. Let’s make sure they have the knowledge and ability to delay their first pregnancies and then space their next ones—so mothers survive, and the children are healthier.”

Like the potential of youth, Valerie’s passion is boundless. Not only does Valerie support Pathfinder philanthropically, she proudly serves on Pathfinder’s board of directors, which she sees as an opportunity to grow even closer to this critical cause.

“As a board member, I am learning so much—that reproductive health is tightly connected with so many other issues. I feel like I’m back in school, and I love that.”

Valerie knows the difference knowledge can make. And she understands the power of her gifts to Pathfinder, which are essential to starting innovative programs that spark change.

Last year, through Pathfinder’s programs, young people made nearly 700,000 visits for youth-friendly services. That’s more than half a million visits for services designed to meet their particular sexual and reproductive health needs and make sure they have choices.

Valerie has watched her three children grow and make their own decisions about their lives. Now she stands with Pathfinder to make sure young people everywhere have a choice and a chance.