World Contraception Day

The right to plan for the future
Dear Pathfinders,

Although I always pictured myself working in economics or chemistry, I became passionate about medicine after completing my bachelor's degree. Now, I'm proud to say that I was the first medical student from my village, and I love my work.

During medical school, I decided to focus on public health and, in my first year, I worked in an anti-venereal clinic where I completed my medical thesis. The clinic received a lot of young patients. Through the Ministry of Health I learned that HIV and pregnancies were some of the most significant risks for the young population. This drove my commitment to sexual and reproductive health and my clinical focus on reproductive autonomy and contraception for young people.

Pathfinder has set up a national civil society coalition with groups in the region, and they are discussing safe abortion in a very candid way with local government authorities. The future inclusion of safe abortion in reproductive health guidelines, standards, and protocols will help reduce clandestine abortion and women dying as a result.

In less than three years of being in Côte d’Ivoire, Pathfinder International has made a significant contribution to addressing sexual and reproductive health issues and reducing maternal mortality. Here at Pathfinder in Côte d’Ivoire, we appreciate every person who stands with Pathfinder to support our country.

I believe it is best to educate adolescents and youth about contraception so that they can prevent early and unwanted pregnancies, abortions, sexually transmitted infections, and HIV/AIDS. By doing so, we are helping to guarantee their future well-being.

Pathfinder International’s commitment to reaching women and girls with sexual and reproductive health care “without fear or boundary” resonates with me, and Pathfinder’s approach to helping resource-constrained countries solve critical problems has led to significant changes around the world. I have been fortunate enough to personally see the impact.

The first Pathfinder project I supported in Côte d'Ivoire led to the scale-up of immediate postpartum family planning, reaching many more women and girls at a critical time with contraceptive services. Côte d'Ivoire is one of ten countries in the world with the highest rates of young women dying during pregnancy. Helping young women to prevent unwanted pregnancies and space their pregnancies at healthy intervals is essential to saving their lives.

You can help Dr. Yao reduce unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, and HIV/AIDS in young people in Côte d’Ivoire. Visit pathfinder.org/contraception

Dr. Ernest Yao
Country Director,
Pathfinder International, Côte d’Ivoire
Health care providers—the gateway to contraception in Côte D’Ivoire

Nearly 40 percent of women in Côte d’Ivoire report that their last pregnancy was not one they had planned. Like too many women and girls around the world, Ivorian women face numerous barriers to obtaining contraception—including, in some cases, health care providers themselves.

Health care providers are a woman’s first line of contact when she looks to access contraception, and their interactions with clients are critical.

Pathfinder works in Côte d’Ivoire to educate health care providers and empower them to make their interactions with clients safe, positive, and productive. Our programming also seeks to ensure that health care providers conduct all services and interactions with clients without imposing their own personal bias, a common barrier to contraceptive access among women and adolescent girls.

Providers learn clinical skills that allow them to provide a full range of contraceptive options to women and girls. They are led through facilitated reflections that encourage them to examine their own values and inherent biases when it comes to contraception, and to overcome them.

We know that offering women contraception immediately after they’ve given birth is a vital opportunity to introduce reproductive health care. Providers learn how to offer contraceptive counseling and methods—including the postpartum intrauterine device (IUD)—to women who have recently delivered.

Providers like Yacouba and Soro can now teach other providers what they know. They are the gateway to providing contraceptive options to many more women in Côte d’Ivoire and having a lasting impact on Ivorian women’s rights and health.

“This [contraception during the immediate postpartum period] is important because it prevents unwanted pregnancies and above all contributes to the reduction of maternal and infant mortality,” said Kangoute Yacouba, head of gynecology and obstetrics at Agboville Regional Hospital.

“This is essential for their health and rights because contraception prevents close pregnancies, promotes the resumption of sexual activity without fear, and promotes family development,” said Soro.

She said that learning about long-acting methods, like IUDs and implants, has been particularly crucial to her work as a midwife, especially for clients who have delivered or obtained an abortion.

“Pathfinder has helped me meet the needs of the women I serve through training, coaching, supervision, and supply of materials.”

“We think about the effectiveness and reversibility of these methods, and the return to fertility after their removal and how it’s cost-effective,” she said.

“I have increased access to contraception for all women by helping them to choose the method from prenatal consultation through childbirth and postnatal consultation,” said Mrs. Soro, a midwife who has worked at the general hospital in Adzopé for 12 years.

“I also take the opportunity to ask the women who come to vaccinate their children.”

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*The work with providers described in this article is supported by the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation.*
Access to contraception saves women's lives. In fact, if every woman could access the modern contraception she wanted, more than 200 maternal deaths could be averted every single day.

Contraception allows a woman to decide when and if she wants to have children, to prioritize her health, to choose education—it gives her the power to shape her future.

That's why Pathfinder has programs in 20 countries across three continents, working to bring contraceptive care to the 214 MILLION women around the world who want to avoid pregnancy, but are not using modern contraception.

And that's why we are dedicating this issue of Pathways to World Contraception Day. World Contraception Day, on September 26th, is a global day of recognition that seeks to improve awareness of contraception and, specifically, to enable young people to make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health.

You can learn more about how contraception saves lives and make a difference with us in honor of World Contraception Day: pathfinder.org/contraception

Pathfinder’s commitment to contraception and community-based service is rooted in the courage and conviction of its founders.

In the 1930s, Dr. Clarence Gamble worked with a team of volunteers to introduce family planning services in the United States. Recognizing the fundamental role that contraception plays in the lives and health care of women and families, Gamble and his team helped introduce family planning services to health clinics in 14 states. Many of these clinics would later become Planned Parenthood centers.

Throughout the 1950s, they visited more than 50 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America, resulting in the establishment of Family Planning Associations in more than 30 countries on six continents. Dr. Gamble and his wife, Sarah, established Pathfinder as “The Pathfinder Fund” in 1957.

Pathfinder’s guiding principle has always been to go where the need is greatest. Today, Pathfinder continues to reach some of the most vulnerable communities with contraception and sexual and reproductive health care that protects women’s rights, save lives, and helps communities to flourish.
“My tenth pregnancy included a lot of suffering,” said Rahamou. “At that time, I was working from morning until evening. When it came time to deliver, I decided to come to the clinic since my life was at stake. I was very afraid, and the doctor told me that it could take a while.”

The doctor informed her she might be in labor all night. “I usually give birth as soon as I get to the center, but this time I didn’t, and I was really scared for my life. It was then that I understood that I had to stop; I couldn’t have another child.”

Rahamou’s story is not unique in remote areas of Niger. Beginning in adolescence, girls begin giving birth, and many do not stop until they are faced with obstetric complications, menopause, or death. Women have an average of seven children in their lifetimes. They often forgo an education, an income, and their youth to mother multiple children from a young age.

Although most girls marry before they reach adulthood, less than 4 percent of adolescent girls use contraceptives. Many girls do not know about contraception, and those that do often struggle to access a method in a conservative setting like Niger where men often make household decisions.

“Contraception changes lives

Rahamou’s life has changed since her tenth child arrived. For the first time in years, she is not pregnant and will not be in the foreseeable future, or if she chooses, ever again.

Rahamou now has an intrauterine device (IUD), accessed at a health center in Zinder, Niger, through Pathfinder’s IMPACT Program. Almost 400,000 women [as of August 2018] have accessed contraception for the first time through the program—allowing them to delay, space, and prevent pregnancies as they wish.

Young women who are now using contraception will likely live much different lives from Rahamou.

“We heard about contraception from the relais communautes [community-based distributors] and during visits to the health center. We also talk about it with our friends, because contraception really is very important for us as women,” said Rahamou. “The relais communautes raise awareness among the women of the village. They teach us a lot about our general well-being.”

“They teach our young married teenagers not to do as we did,” she continued. “We didn’t get that chance, but they can live differently.”

Rahamou explains how access to contraception has reduced her suffering. “Before we began using it, we would take on pregnancies just nine months after giving birth. I took this contraceptive because I had suffered a lot, and the IUD allows you to be at ease.”
Contraceptive choice in rural communities

The IMPACT Program has reached Rahamou and other women in Zinder through an approach that relies on community-based distributors. Community-based distributors provide information to women and couples about contraception and offer short-term contraceptive methods like oral contraceptive pills and condoms—particularly crucial to boosting access in rural areas where...
Adama Ali Zourkaleini’s passion for communications and reproductive health care is infused into every aspect of her work as Pathfinder’s Marketing and Communications Officer in Niger.

Adama helps to tell Pathfinder’s story in a way that inspires people to support sexual and reproductive rights and advance women’s access to contraception. While she says it is challenging to persuade Nigerians to change their attitudes and behaviors regarding sexual and reproductive health, she remains committed. For as long as she can remember, Adama has been an activist. As a high school student, she mobilized her peers to make the student body aware of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV and AIDS. She volunteered to support people in vulnerable circumstances, including patients in long-term care, orphaned children, and people without homes or food. Through this work, she developed a knack for communicating about her passions—what she calls “an awakening of [her] conscience.”

Now, Adama is keen to help girls stay in school and educate them on issues related to family planning so that when they are of reproductive age they can be confident and healthy. Most girls are unable to attend school because they are married when they are young.

Adama is fueled by knowing that the work she does at Pathfinder will prevent similar tragedies from occurring in other families. She hopes that, in the future, childbirth will be an occasion for all women and families to celebrate, not fear.
Born in Concord, Massachusetts, in 1926, Wheeler grew up the son of dairy farmers. After a brief stint in the Army Air Corps, he graduated from Bowdoin in 1948 and later received his master’s degree from Harvard. In 1961, he joined Sergeant Shriver in establishing the Peace Corps, eventually leaving for an esteemed career at the US Agency for International Development (USAID). In 1969, Mr. Wheeler became USAID’s Mission Director in Pakistan. At the time, the country consisted of the western wing, what we think of today as Pakistan, and the eastern wing, currently known as Bangladesh.

In his memoir, Wheeler shared how family planning programs in Bangladesh (then eastern Pakistan) were first established: an existing cholera program enlisted a community-based volunteer to teach women about fertility and provide contraceptives. The program found that when women and men received the requisite information and means of protection, they waited longer to have children and spaced their pregnancies at safer intervals. Given its success, the program eventually expanded throughout eastern Pakistan.

Wheeler said eastern Pakistan’s support for family planning at that time contributes to the vast difference in contraceptive use among Pakistanis and Bangladeshis today—nearly 27 percent more women of reproductive age use contraception in Bangladesh than in Pakistan. In addition, he attributes the difference to Bangladesh continuing to make family planning a higher priority, the greater likelihood that women and girls in Bangladesh attend school, and to cultural differences between the two countries.

It was also in Pakistan that Mr. Wheeler worked with Steve Sinding, a recognized expert on international population issues, a Pathfinder International board member, and until his retirement in 2006, Director General of the International Planned Parenthood Federation. Sinding introduced Mr. Wheeler to Pathfinder’s work and ultimately recruited him to the board of directors.

Mr. Wheeler became involved with Pathfinder because he saw how Pathfinder’s approach in Pakistan improved the lives of women, their families, and their communities. Mr. Wheeler’s favorite slogan comes from Immanuel Kant: So act that your actions can be universalized.

“This contains the assumption that all of us are important—we are brothers and sisters in a single family,” Wheeler said.

Visit legacy.pathfinder.org