



# How Technology can Close Gaps in Information Access for Women & Girls

## Learning from projects furthering gender equality in Ethiopia

Women and girls face many barriers to accessing information which enables them to improve their income, make informed decisions about their health or assert their rights. They may have lower literacy and digital skills, be excluded from spaces where they can learn and engage, or face social norms which deny them opportunities to access sources of information, such as through phones. In many contexts these barriers exacerbate existing challenges faced by marginalized groups such as remote locations, limited electricity or connectivity, and language barriers.

Two projects in Ethiopia leveraged the innovative technology of Amplio's *Talking Book* to overcome these barriers, ensuring women and girls can make informed decisions about their health and wellbeing.

**The need:** Women and adolescents in both regions in Ethiopia (Amhara and Afar) have limited access to sexual reproductive health and family planning information and services.

In Afar, communities travel frequently in search of pasture and water for livestock, so they are often far from community centers. In Amhara, the war in the northern region affected some of the project area participants. Overall, poor road conditions, minimal transportation options, conflict, and flooding often made travel to project sites impossible. In addition, finding staff and mentors from project locations who met educational and literacy criteria to facilitate sessions was a challenge.

Added to this, adolescents had very little leisure time during which they could meet in the day and social norms proved a barrier to women and girls from accessing phones and other technologies.

As a result, both projects sought a solution which enabled community members to access program content on demand, independent of location or security. Amplio's *Talking Book* was chosen as an appropriate innovation for use in this context.

**Act with Her** is a 5-year program implemented by CARE Ethiopia and Pathfinder International aiming to improve adolescent health and wellbeing through engagement of young adolescents, their parents, and their communities. The program struggled to reach adolescents in the Afar region due to the migratory pastoralist setting.

**BERHAN** is a Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights initiative in Amhara region of Ethiopia funded by Austrian development cooperation. It targets women, girls, men, and boys in rural communities where rates of Female Genital Cutting (FGC) and Early Marriage (EM) are high but access to quality SRH services is challenging. BERHAN aims to enable women and girls to exercise their sexual and reproductive health rights, leading to improved wellbeing.

**The technology:** The *Amplio Talking Book* is a battery-powered audio device specifically designed for rural, low-literacy communities which often lack reliable electricity or equitable access to information. *Talking Books* put knowledge in the hands of those who need it most and share consistent, quality messages in local languages.

**Use:** Through Amplio, the programs were able to disseminate consistent, high-quality messaging in local languages, give women and girls access to technology for learning, and track usage or the number of times sessions were played using a specially designed dashboard.

*Act with Her* used the *Talking Book* to engage 34 girls' groups and boys' groups with content on reproductive health, communication, and education, reaching 850 adolescents. After one year of programming, usage data showed boys' groups listened to 1058 complete messages, for a total of 85.2 hours of played messages and an average of 62 message completions per *Talking Book*. Girls' groups spent more time on this, with a total of 149.6 hours of played messages representing 1100 complete messages and an average of 69 message completions per *Talking Book*.

*BERHAN* distributed the *Talking Book* to 50 [Social Analysis and Action](#) (SAA) groups totaling 1250 members. Its primary topics were female genital cutting, child marriage, and gender-based violence. In the first year, usage data from 57 *Talking Books* showed groups listened to 779 complete messages, for a total of 65.4 hours.

**Effectiveness:** The *Talking Book* proved effective for women and girls since it is simple to use and, for the most part, lacks a telephone feature. In both locations women and girls had restricted access to cellphones due to a number of factors, including cost and priority; the talking book helped overcome these barriers to ensure they could access regular health-related information.

Program staff reported that the fact the sessions were in their own language and the devices were used every week generated curiosity and enthusiasm among those who were listening.

Girls found it simple to listen to and discuss topics like menstruation as it didn't feel like a taboo subject coming from a device.

### Benefits of Amplio's *Talking Book* for the context:

- Does not require electricity or connectivity
- Supports users with low literacy levels
- Appropriate for use by women and girls in even the most conservative communities
- Can host any programming content
- Includes a feedback mechanism that allows for listener requests and questions



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**“The adolescent girls have never even used a phone, let alone such a device; technology was their first exposure; they even perceive the audios as if a talking person is speaking to them.”**

Halima

Act With Her project team



2100 people reached by content from Talking Books



Nearly 4000 health and educational messages completed on Talking Books

**“They were even ashamed of talking to us as experts...but the technology provided them with a certain comfort. Since we were unable to locate any mentors who could speak Afari (the local language), the device made it very simple for them to access the curriculum in their own language.”**

Mekdes

Act With Her project team

### Impact:

Act with Her reached a total of 9,604 female and 6,846 male participants between 2021 and 2023, helping them to forge the health, academic, economic, and social pathways necessary to succeed as they enter adulthood.

A total of 16,636 men and 31,249 women were reached by BERHAN between 2021 and 2023. There have been increased reports of early marriages and female genital cutting being prevented by the community.

The talking book contributed to this reach by an estimated 20% by ensuring the most marginalized and hard to reach were included, despite the challenges posed by location and conflict.

### Learnings:

**Training on feedback mechanisms supports adaptive management:** Projects should train participants on using the feedback mechanism option on the device continuously to ensure project teams can access regular information for improving project implementation.

**Dedicated technology support is needed for the team:** Accessing and updating the dashboard for monitoring use proved challenging for program teams. Community facilitators or project team members need to regularly connect the talking book device to an Android-supporting smartphone, tablet or laptop monitoring data and user feedback can be recorded. It is recommended for country offices to dedicate at least one IT specialist to this.

**Solar power is preferable to batteries:** Instead of relying on a battery-powered gadget, it is advisable to install solar-supported devices to ensure that they are cost-effective to operate.

**Training community volunteers is advisable for extremely remote locations:** When implementing programs in remote and pastoral areas, projects may struggle to find staff and mentors who reside in project areas. Projects should train volunteers who have the knowledge of the local language to support community with accessing pre-recorded sessions on the device. This is a specific recommendation for projects considering the technology for extremely hard to reach and migratory participants.



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### For more information contact

**Addisalem Berhane** | Senior Technical Advisor, Gender & Digital Inclusion, Gender Justice, CARE USA  
email: [addisalem.berhane@care.org](mailto:addisalem.berhane@care.org)

