

## Research brief: Asking about identity may disrupt perpetuation of stigma

### INTRODUCTION

People whose identity or experiences have historically been marginalized, such as people living with disabilities, people living in internally displaced persons camps, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Queer individuals (LGBTQ+), adolescents, and sex workers, face increased barriers to accessing health care, including abortion care. In contexts where these identities or experiences are criminalized, individuals may be further marginalized from care for fear facing prosecution. Research must both identify the barriers faced by these populations along with ways to better support them. This requires first identifying these populations by asking them about their identities and experiences, a process that can both perpetuate stigma and generate mistrust. On the other hand, asking could intentionally signal to communities that services are open to supporting them.

### THE STUDY

Abortion hotlines Generation Initiative for Women and Youth Network (GIWYN) in Nigeria and Trust for Indigenous Culture and Health (TICAH) in Kenya identified different populations they felt were underrepresented in their caller base and who they wanted to ensure could access the comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and abortion information offer through their hotlines. GIWYN selected sex workers, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people living in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, and TICAH selected sex workers, people living with disabilities, and adolescents. We conducted 16 key informant interviews with people comprising or serving these communities to better understand the barriers these populations experience in accessing SRH and abortion services and their recommendations for improving outreach from the hotlines. Specifically, interviewers asked participants how the hotlines could ask about individuals' identities and/or experiences in a sensitive and appropriate way to measure the number of

callers from each population and evaluate the recommended outreach strategies. Interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed and analyzed thematically.

### FINDINGS

Community stakeholders expressed varying opinions about the best ways to ask about the identity of members of their communities. A few stakeholders were unsure what would be the best way to ask, though no one explicitly stated that it should not be asked. Because of the differing opinions in whether these questions should be asked directly (ex. 'Are you a sex worker?') or indirectly or using coded language (ex. 'What is your job?'), we focus more on the considerations that were shared for why a question should be asked one way or another. Overall, the main themes that emerged when stakeholders considered the best practices for asking about identity were disrupting stigma, concerns around perpetuating stigma, and the importance of creating a safe, trusting relationship prior to asking about identity.

### DISRUPTING STIGMA WHEN ASKING ABOUT IDENTITY

Stakeholders highlighted the importance of disrupting stigma with the way questions are asked about identity. Specifically, some stakeholders suggested that asking directly about these identities rather than approaching the topic with caution could normalize and affirm these identities. For example, two key informants suggested asking 'Are you disabled?' directly, rather than other euphemistic questions like 'Do you have special needs?' and, if they responded yes, asking for clarity on the type of disability,

**'...for us, the work is to normalize the disability just the same way you are trying to normalize abortion. And so, you ask. And it's important for the language to be correct. When talking about abortion, you don't tiptoe around the issue, you have a word for it.'**

It's abortion. And the same way, if you want to find out if the person is disabled, "Are you disabled? Yes or no", they say "yes." Do you mind describing your disability or saying more about your disability? Or what type of disability, whatever. But when you now start, "are you differently challenged?" "Do you have special needs?" Those are confusing. That's a confusing language. Because if you ask me if I have special needs I will say, "No." if you ask me if I am disabled, I will say, "Yes." And if you ask me if I am differently challenged, I'll say "No." I don't know what that is. So, it's very important, the stigma that is associated with disability, we need to normalize. It's a human situation.'

(Person living with disabilities, Kenya)

Relatedly, one of the adolescents interviewed felt that asking adolescents directly about their age would help them to build confidence and normalize conversations around SRH.

## CONCERNS ABOUT PERPETUATING STIGMA

On the other hand, individuals interviewed who did not identify as being a part of one of the above-mentioned populations had more concern that asking about identity could feel threatening or stigmatizing, though some felt how the question was received would largely depend on the individual being asked. In particular, people who worked with or were themselves sex workers were split on whether or not asking directly would be offensive. One person who worked with sex workers but was not themselves a sex worker, suggested asking indirect questions like how many people they have sex with would be helpful,

'I don't think they should even bring that. Because most times when you say and they don't even see your face especially, they won't want to say anything. "Why are you asking me such?" they don't easily say it... "Oh, I am a sex worker." No one says it.

So, when you ask them for the first time, they will be shocked, "Why are you asking me?" I'm asking for-- they may even say, "So this hotline is for sex workers only, I thought it is for the general public."

(Sex workers, Nigeria)

Similarly, a stakeholder who worked in IDP camps mentioned that people living in the IDP camps sometimes used the names of neighboring towns when asked where they resided, as such, to find out where people live, one might need to ask clarifying questions or have intimate familiarity with the geography around IDP camps.

These split views on the best ways to ask people about their identities speaks to the lack of generalizability not only from identity to identity but even within a singular identity.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### CREATING A SAFE SPACE

While opinions varied about exactly how questions about identity should be asked, stakeholders across the board stressed the importance of creating a safe and trusting space for callers before asking questions that could be considered sensitive. Creating such a space could allow callers to feel more comfortable responding authentically. Stakeholders suggested the following strategies:

- Describing why certain information is being collected (ex. "In order to better reach populations such as sex workers that we've previously had a hard time reaching, we ask participants about their history of sex work.")
- Ensuring participants verbally that the space is nonjudgmental and that you will attend to them

regardless of their responses (Ex. “This is a non-judgmental space, your answers will not be shared with anyone outside of the organization, nor will they determine whether or not you will receive care.”)

- Connecting individuals to services through a trusted friend of a shared identity, so that they might feel more comfortable being open and honest in responding to questions because of the trust associated with the referral

## CONCLUSIONS

In doing this work we acknowledge that identity is in no way a monolith and different populations as well as different individuals within those populations may have different preferences around the language that is used to describe their experiences. Moreover, people have intersectional identities that this study could not adequately explore.

While more research is needed on the best way to ask questions about identity, we call on researchers to allow participants to shape how questions are asked that align with their own preferences and language used for their identity and experiences and to be mindful of the ways in which study questions can both disrupt stigma and perpetuate it.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Research Consultant Sachiko Ragosta served as the first author of this research brief. Associate Project Director Chiara Bercu and Research Scientist Alexandra Wollum provided input and support throughout the writing process. We would also like to thank our partners at TICAH and GIWYN who worked closely with us throughout the research process and who are both committed to reaching historically marginalized communities with SRH and abortion information. We would not have been able to do this research without them.

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*Issued May 2024*