

# Cellphone apps fight Africa's sexual taboos

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When Charles Immanuel Akhimien was a medical student he was shocked to learn that a former classmate had died from a back-alley abortion.

The brilliant young woman's life may have been spared if she had the kind of apps that are available today that discreetly inform [young people](#) about sex, Akhimien said.

"When it comes to contraception, the lack of communication generates more and more AIDS infections and [unwanted pregnancies](#). These tragedies could be avoided," Akhimien told AFP.

In the doctor's native Nigeria, 3.1 million people are HIV-positive and 34,000 women die each year from botched abortions, according to official statistics.

Akhimien's app "myPaddi" anonymously connects young people with doctors who advise them on sex and contraception.

The software was among 30 medical innovations showcased at the World Health Organization's second Africa Health Forum, hosted in Praia, the capital of Cape Verde in West Africa.

Selected from among more than 2,400 submissions, many of the apps address reproduction and sexually transmitted diseases in countries where sex education is often taboo and abortion is generally illegal.

Akhimien's compatriot Morenike Fajemisin has the same determination to combat the paucity of sex education in Nigeria and to help women claim control over their own bodies.

A pharmacist, the 30-year-old developed a cellphone app called "Whispa"—suggesting discretion—through which women can obtain contraception anonymously, without having to answer probing questions.

"If a young girl asks for the pill at a doctor's office or in a pharmacy, she might be lectured," Fajemisin said. "Isn't she too young? Is she a virgin? How many partners did she have?"

## 'No human bias'

"These intrusive questions can block young women, who might be scared to speak about their sexual life to doctors. With a [mobile app](#), there's no human bias," she said.

She said a cousin she grew up with would likely not have got pregnant in high school if she had had Whispa.

"She would have continued her studies. She was a brilliant girl. I hope my innovation will allow every girl to make her own choices," Fajemisin said.

Even when a [pregnancy](#) is wanted—and having children is widely encouraged in Africa—few apps are adapted to local traditions and culture.

Examples are the Zimbabwean app "Afrimom", available in English and local languages, and "My Pregnancy Journey", being developed by South African entrepreneur Jacqueline Rogers with her own funds.

Rogers' app, to come out in April, offers advice to expectant mothers, spelling out month by month what they may encounter during the course of their pregnancies.

"I want African women to have access to every possible knowledge about their pregnancy—and influence positively motherhood in Africa," Rogers said.

"In Africa, the needs for reliable information regarding pregnancy are huge," she added.

Nine of the world's 10 countries with the highest infant mortality rates are in Africa, and half the children who die before age five live in sub-Saharan Africa, noted WHO's regional director Matshidiso Moeti at the start of the Forum.

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