

Using mobile to boost access to safe, legal abortion services

Created by safe2choose, Fem is a new initiative designed to give South Africans access to immediate and locally relevant sexual health services and information, via an SMS platform.



Fem will launch many other campaigns over the next few coming months. The first will refer women to safe and legal abortion service providers in their area, quickly effectively, and privately.

Unsafe abortions

According to research carried out by Ipas, a global non-profit organisation that opposes unsafe abortions, a full 30% of South African women are not aware that abortion is legal, while an estimated 50% of South African abortions are performed illegally, in unsafe environments.

“18.5-million of the global total of 21.6-million annual unsafe abortions occur in developing countries like South Africa,” says Phephisile Mathizerd, Fem’s associate programme officer. “Unsafe abortions have a massive impact on young women, the members of local society most impacted by poverty and unemployment. Young women have huge potential when it comes to contributing positively to national development. It’s imperative that we find a way to make the vision of the constitution real, and that we evolve into a society where all citizens have comprehensive access to sexual health services and information.”

How it works

Fem takes advantage of the geolocation ability of mobile phones. The user sends the trigger word FEM to short code 30816 via SMS. After answering a few questions on the platform, they will then receive a referral SMS to a legal and safe health facility that provides abortions nearby.

An introductory message will request permission for the system to map the user's geographic location, which allows for the provision of specific information about service providers in the user's immediate area. These providers meet key qualification criteria and quality standards, and have been verified by the safe2choose team. Users unwilling or unable to provide geolocation consent are given, or directed to, a manual look-up option which allows them to manually select their location and receive a referral.

Closing the information gap

“The distance between the ideals of the South African constitution and real life is still much too wide,” concludes Mathizerd. “We're hoping this initiative closes the gap by providing vital information to South Africans most in need. The message is simple - if you need assistance or access to information, you just have to send an SMS.”

Part of an international non-profit movement, safe2choose is a social enterprise whose mission is to provide evidence-based information and counselling on how to have a safe abortion. Fem is safe2choose's innovation arm that experiments with ways to help achieve its mission using new modern technology.

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