Photo Credit: Mali Health

Mali Health

In the peri-urban communities of Sabalibougou in Bamako, Mali, many women are illiterate, mainly as a consequence of socio-economic norms. They also predominantly communicate in Bambara, a local language. Because of the lack of native language diversity on the internet, these women have limited access to technology in their own language, contributing to low digital literacy and hindering their economic opportunities.

To help educate and empower these women, Mali Health used technology developed by Lenali, a Malian start-up, to create Kènèya Blon, a free visual and audio social network providing access to local health information for women.

Mali Health worked with 400 women in women's profit-sharing collectives that produce health goods like soaps, sanitary pads, juices, and peanut butter. The team trained the women on the use of technology and the social network, helping them to understand the internet, access health and wellness information, and build their confidence. Mali Health collected feedback from the women to ensure the technology and content was usable and relevant.

The women who participated in the project—many of whom had never before accessed the internet or encountered content designed specifically for them—were able to listen to audio clips or watch short videos to learn valuable health information. Some of the most popular topics included prenatal health, vaccines, malaria, and infectious diseases.

Through voice messages, women connected and shared information with each other and were able to reach health experts from Mali Health-affiliated clinics. Since it is difficult for the participants to reach health centers in person, the platform allowed women to leave messages for and receive responses from medical professionals, enabling families to address health concerns without leaving home.

With a grant from the WomenConnect Challenge, USAID's global call to close the gender digital divide, the Mali Health team used this creative and tailored approach to successfully design a unique platform that was mindful of its target audience's education, skills, and needs.

The project demonstrated that technology programs targeting communities with low literacy and low digital literacy (often seen as key barriers to internet use) can be effective when designed with the intended audience in mind.