

## **Birthing Kits for Kiribati Pilot Project (June 2023)**

(Sponsored by the Kiribati Uniting Church HQ, Antebuka (KUC HQ), Bairnsdale and Johnsonville Uniting Churches).

The aim of this pilot project was to train 20 local lay Kiribati women, from different denominations and lay people, to learn public speaking skills and the distribution of birthing kits provided by the Birthing Kit Foundation of Australia (BKFA) [www.bkfa.org.au](http://www.bkfa.org.au) To determine if the kits would be acceptable and organisations interested in a partner relationship with BKFA.

### Background Information

This project grew from a grassroots approach to community development following a long term relationship between the Bairnsdale and Johnsonville Uniting Churches in East Gippsland, Victoria Australia and the Kiribati Uniting Church (KUC) in Kiribati. The need for birthing kits to compliment the already accessible Days for Girls Kits [www.dfg.org](http://www.dfg.org) that was initiated by the Johnsonville Uniting Church in Australia was identified as being of greater importance to save the lives of women and girls during labour and delivery.

### Project overview

With a representative from Toastmasters Australia and the two churches; 200 birthing kits were transported to KUC HQ. Over a period of less than two weeks 12 women were trained in public speaking and the distribution of birthing kits. Of these 12 women 6 volunteered and successfully completed their training by being assessed by local Health Promotion Volunteer Taraa Kanenei during a distribution in their own communities in South Tarawa.

### Project Highlights

- The support offered by KUC HQ especially the RAK Women's Centre Coordinator Maata Yetzes in hosting the workshops, providing transport, a good venue for the training including data projector, with food and resources for volunteers. Her vision for this project to continue is commendable
- The transformative training "Speak with Impact" which gave the twelve women their voice; to speak up and project what messages they had to say. Some had never attempted public speaking before and during the final session everyone spoke with impact.
- The enthusiasm of the six participants who wished to engaged with their communities who then provided a more than adequate presentation about the birthing kits, in local language at village health talks, according to Taraa Kanenai
- The enthusiasm of three of the "Speak with Impact" course participants who wished to form a Toastmasters group locally.

- The acceptance of the kits by the women and girls we were told, including the older women who needed to be offered a kit as a sign of respect.
- Local people taking control of the distribution eagerly as birthing practices especially in the Outer Islands were considered in more need with stories of the use of rusty scissors and men's used razor blades to cut the cord as well as midwives not using gloves or washing hands.
- Maata Yetze also has access to distribution to the Outer Islands via the KUC ship and had plans to distribute birthing kits along with the Days for Girls kits that were already being distributed widely.
- Despite a power outage in one of the maneaba's (local meeting house), the community did not cancel the distribution but found solar lighting and the distribution went ahead with lots of speeches and about 30 kits distributed. A success despite low visibility.
- The leverage of health promotion activities initiated by Taraa Kanenei to teach the community members about women's health during the training was commendable.
- At completion of the project three grants were applied for to ensure the sustainability of this project.

### Project Challenges

The intense heat of Kiribati and short time frame of the project meant that some village distributions did not take place during the allocated time. However, with a local person able to continue the project it means that it is more sustainable in an ongoing way if further kits are provided in the future.

Training cross culturally was problematic with more time needed to assess the full understanding of students with the use of interpreters (which were used in an ad hoc basis), a designated interpreter would have been helpful.

Product damage and storage is an issue across Kiribati. KUC HQ has a container that is secure and used specifically by RAK Women's Centre so good storage of kits until distribution is available.

### Conclusion

To sum up, this pilot project was a low cost and valuable asset to helping improve the health outcome of women and girls who become pregnant and their infants in South Tarawa, Kiribati. The pilot project trained lay volunteers to distribute kits successfully which meant a wide reach of influence in their communities. KUC HQ through the RAK Women's Centre can complement the birthing practices at the Tungaru Central Hospital at Nowerewere and will make kits available on request if needed to midwives or health promotion staff.

With the addition of public speaking skills it was demonstrated that lay women and from different denominations in the community could be empowered to use their voices and speak to their communities with authority to spread the news about the availability and usefulness of the Australian birthing kits to provide a clean birth place in their local communities, changing a dirty birth to a clean one and saving lives.

(Please note - that women are considered women when they are over the age of 25 and girls younger than 25 in Tarawa, all in this cohort of 6 trained volunteers were women and leaders in their denominations).