



PUBLISHING & PROGRAMMING FOR CHANGE

**simply put**, we believe, an informed, confident parent can be her own, and her child's best advocate for school, for health, for life.

In 2012 then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced the small grants Women's Health Innovation Program (WHIP) in Bangladesh and Liberia. This two generation health and literacy program is a partnership of the State Department's Office of Global Women's Issues and The What To Expect Foundation, building on the success of the Baby Basics prenatal health literacy program across the United State.

In 2016 the program's leadership launched **Simply Put**, an NGO to support WHIP's pilot programs and expand its multi-disciplinary health, literacy and empowerment programming to expecting and new parents in the US and around the world.



“Illiteracy keeps women marginalized and constitutes a foremost obstacle to reducing extreme poverty in a technology-driven world. Women’s literacy improves livelihoods, leads to better child and maternal health, and favors girls’ access to education...In short, newly literate women have a positive ripple effect on all development indicators.”

Irina Bokova,  
Director General, UNESCO

## We believe...

**An informed, confident parent can be her own, and her child’s best advocate for school, for health, for life.**

Pregnancy and new parenthood provide an opportunity to help young women (and their partners) develop critical thinking, literacy and self-advocacy skills they will need to have healthier pregnancies, safer deliveries and thriving families. Young parents are eager for information; and, even families, cultures and countries that discourage formal education for women are willing to support learning if it leads to a healthier baby.

Simply Put’s materials provide women and families with evidence-based, culturally appropriate and entertaining pregnancy and parenting information, combined with joyful learning that builds on group dynamics, storytelling, art, reading, writing, singing and friendship to inspire and encourage a parent’s personal and intellectual growth in ways that will enrich their own and their child’s lives far beyond pregnancy.

Rather than create new programs or interventions, Simply Put’s materials, training and learning paradigm coordinates existing NGO and governmental agency messaging, ensures that health information is evidence-based and engaging, and builds the capacity of front-line health workers to provide accurate information and empowering literacy education.

## PROGRAM GOALS

To help young adults “find their voices and use their words” during the transformative experience of pregnancy, delivery and new parenthood, and support the transfer and growth of knowledge, compassion and wisdom from one generation to the next, our program’s goals are:

1. **To provide** evidence-based, culturally appropriate pregnancy and parenting materials to underserved families that are attractive, comprehensive and easy to read, and serve as a catalyst for life-long learning and family literacy.
2. **To create** opportunities for low-income women, girls and families to develop critical thinking, planning and decision making skills, build supportive social networks and access healthy work and living situations for themselves, their families and their communities.
3. **To teach** healthcare providers, educators and communities how to use new tools and strategies to understand the needs of families and respectfully and effectively listen, communicate and support low-income women and their families during pregnancy, childbirth and parenting.
4. **To bring** communities together (including fathers, elders and leaders) to support pregnant women and mothers’ health learning and growth, and ensure families receive compassionate information, timely care and opportunities to thrive.

Please notice that lowering infant and maternal mortality rates is not a Big Belly program goal it is a much wished for consequence of our program and philosophy. Better birth outcomes are just one measure of the intellectual, social and emotional determinants of a civil society based on principles of justice, democracy and community.

# WHAT we've done...

## Beautiful books

*Baby Basics*, *Big Belly Business* and *Babu Barta* are beautiful, evidence-based books about pregnancy written simply and filled with stories, health information and wisdom collected from across the US, Liberia and Bangladesh. Written by local writers, and, joyously illustrated by native artists these books are easy and fun to read. Those who can't read can learn in the "Club", or listen to the audio on a phone. A book, journal, and pencil are free for those in the program. Radio shows use the stories in the book as live-theater and a starting point for lively on-air discussions with experts and parents. 50,000 *Big Belly* books and journals and 50,000 *Babu Barta* books and journals have been delivered to Liberia and Bangladesh. In the US *Baby Basics* has sold 750,000 copies to non-profits across the country.

## Cross-sectorial training and partnership

Traditionally "prenatal education" has emphasized feeding women simple "health messages" or directives instead of giving them ways to develop the transferable, higher-order skills they need to actively care for their pregnancy AND thrive in the future. In a unique partnership of prenatal care providers, community educators and women's empowerment programs, our training gives front line workers an opportunity to experience and develop new skills in strength based, adult teaching and learning strategies. The training helps many professionals and programs promote critical thinking, reading and advocacy skills –by incorporating books and social support into the work they already do.

## "Pregnancy" Clubs

While *Baby Basics*, *Big Belly Business* or *Babu Barta* can be used by midwives, health and literacy educators and community workers while sitting alone with a woman or family, it is when women come together – to talk and learn from one another that exciting change happens outside the parameters of "health education". *Big Belly Clubs* in Liberia or *Gorba Katha* in Bangladesh are facilitated by trained "Sisters" and "Brothers" who bring groups together to support one another. This always emerging and fluid group is built around a simple, flexible "framework" By the end of the international pilot, close to 20,000 Liberian women, men and elders, and 35,000 Bengalis will have attended a "moms" club.

**Health Literacy** is the “ability of individuals to gain access to, understand and use information in ways which promote and maintain good health.” World Health Organization

### People die for lack of information

In Liberia, Bangladesh and many countries around the world, people die because of simple things they do not know. Health information poverty is “any situation where a citizen, a health worker, or a policy maker does not have access to the healthcare information they need to protect their own health or the health of others.” During pregnancy and new parenthood correct information can be as powerful as any drug.

We thought she was okay. We carried her to hospital too late.\*

This is my 7<sup>th</sup> belly. I have 2 babies. So much before I did not know.

With my first baby they kept saying “have a safe delivery.” I did. But my baby died.\*

I already knew taytay water (breastmilk) was good for babies. But I thought that first brown yellow water was bad.

### Simple does not mean simplistic.

Health information is often condensed to simplistic “health messages” addressing surface issues fed to audiences with promise of reward. But simplistic directives, without context or cause, are easily dismissed, especially by those who don’t trust the messenger. Adults have a wide range of experiences and beliefs they draw upon when making health decisions. Simple health information that clarifies “how and why” can inspire a deeper understanding of issues, develop trust for the messenger, and foster an ability to extrapolate to other health situations. Creating simple health information takes an appreciation of the issue’s complexity, sympathy for the audience’s experiences, and a commitment to a comprehensive explanation. Simple is not easy but is more likely to create lasting change.

### Science informs but art transforms.

The narrative we tell ourselves as individuals and share as a culture inform everything we believe and do. Health information that forgets that we are emotional and social beings will not change hearts and minds. Art help us understand the world around us in a different way than do facts and figures. When we read novels, listen to stories, watch movies or look at an illustration we are actively, and seemingly effortlessly, creating opinions, forming beliefs and building empathy. Sharing and telling stories of health traditions and changing the narrative may be as powerful as any medicine. After all, the medically proven placebo effect comes from a story that is believable.

The stories about Boimah and Hawa! We can be laughing– but I think Hawa was right to go to the midwife.

I can see a picture of a girl that looks just like me sick and spitting up...and look at her husband – he looks mad.

**Literacy** is a fundamental human right and the foundation for lifelong learning. It is fully essential to social and human development in its ability to transform lives.”  
UNESCO

“Reading and writing are the currency of the information age and the foundation of a just democracy.”

Those who can not read or write are at the margins of their society. Countries that don't read or write are at the mercy of the global economy. The expense of schooling, the dry language of textbooks and a cultural preference for oral story telling has left millions behind - uninterested or unable to read or write, and with no written stories that reflect their lives. By providing books that are timely, interesting, relevant, respectful and engaging, we build a culture of learning and literacy. Weaving literacy education, critical thinking, and open discussion into the fabric of life (and in moments such as pregnancy, parenthood and health) supports a civil society.

I run an adult literacy program in Bong County. There are no words in our village. I mean no words, forget about books there aren't signs. Even the sacks don't have words on them.

A book is like a dream.

We say we are not a “reading people” but we follow the bible and for a long time others have controlled our history, told us who we are and what we should do. We need to write our own story.

When they gave me the book I felt shamed that I cannot read. But then, hah! No one could-except Luah's husband and the midwife. They sit and read it to us and then we talk for hours.

I have never owned a book in my life. This is mine.

I can not read or write. But I need to learn and get a job so my baby girl can go to school one day . **Do not leave me here.**

Literate women are changing the world – **two generations at a time.**

While a mother's skill at breastfeeding or infant care will obviously affects her child's well-being, that mother's literacy and language skills are just as vital. In fact, a mother's literacy skills have proven to be the greatest determinant of her child's future success, more so than family income or neighborhood. Brain imaging shows us one reason for this outcome. From birth, babies' brains need to live in a language rich environment in order to make necessary cognitive connections. Children entering kindergarten who have been spoken to, read to and engaged know 30 million more words than their less prepared peers. Only parents can fill this gap. But, just as airlines instruct parents to put their own air mask on first, and only then can they help their child breathe, it is vital to support parent's skills first with opportunities to bring language into their lives, before expecting them to ably support their child's learning. It has been suggested that improving mothers' literacy skills may be the most effective way to boost children's achievement. Learning during pregnancy and new parenthood helps two generations read and grow together.

**Social Determinants of Health** are “the conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live, and age, and the wider set of forces and systems shaping the conditions of daily life.” WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

**The social determinants of health are social.**

Social capital is “the networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society, enabling that society to function effectively.” Accessible and affordable ANC and safe delivery facilities are a vital first line strategy for reducing infant and maternal morbidity. But studies such as those on “toxic stress,” identify the complex social and emotional factors that influence health and affect birth outcomes. These issues can not be “fixed” during a brief midwifery appointment or a series of “classes” on health. The emotional, physical and even financial support that pregnant and new parents can provide one another on a sustained basis - can help alleviate the isolation, misunderstanding, violence and other factors that are the social determinants of health.

I thought I was all alone. I was glad to not be alone.

I walked into the group and – o so many bellies. We are happy to meet.

My husband used to mismanage money. But now he saves small for my delivery.

Her father pushed her out of the house when he saw the belly. But we all talked. And now, he does not let that child’s feet touch the ground

**Leaving men out of the story is not telling the full story.**

“Maternal and child health” leaves fathers out of healthy families. Unfortunately teen pregnancy or at times even war have erased husbands and/or fathers from the picture. But to do so completely has been a mistake. When men learn health facts about pregnancy, see images and hear stories of fathers around they world, they are able to emotionally connect - to their own emotions, and to their role as a father or grandfather. This process can be transformative. The social and emotional health of men and women caring together can change the story.

**It takes a village.**

Communities decide many of the social norms that influence the overall health and well-being of the individual. What we as a people believe about pregnancy, parenting and relationships are often shaped more by what we have decided together to do and believe than what evidence based medicine has prescribed. Change happens when leaders, as well as members of a community, have a forum for learning and two-way discussion - with one another, and with the healthcare and social service systems.

Maternal Waiting Homes were empty until we all met together. Now they are full.

The Hospital turned people away when they were full. The community met with the hospital and they changed that system.



**Lisa Bernstein**  
**President, Founder**

Lisa Bernstein was an Innovation Fellow at Bank Street College of Education when she launched **Simply Put** - a publishing, programming and distribution organization that reaches neglected audiences in the US and around the world.

Lisa was the co-founder and Executive Director of The What To Expect Foundation which was formed with a limited license to build upon the goodwill and value of the bestselling What To Expect™ pregnancy and parenting brand to benefit families in need. Lisa created award-winning cause marketing campaigns in partnership with Nissan, Clorox and GlaxoSmithKline that disseminated important messages to the What To Expect audience (car seat safety, healthy home, importance of immunization) and raised over \$7 million for the Foundation.

She used those funds to create the **Baby Basics** prenatal health and literacy book and program that has reached close to 750,000 at risk families across the US. The evidence based **Baby Basics** program builds a new paradigm of health education that encourages a woman's personal and intellectual growth during the teachable moment of pregnancy. With extensive training in strength based educational strategies and the **Baby Basics** curriculum, thousands of medical professionals and health educators learned to help women use and read written health information, build critical thinking skills and social networks, and actively engage in pregnancy decisions. Program evaluation showed mother's increased satisfaction with care, post-implementation, and better adherence to pre-natal care, post-partum and well-baby appointments. **Baby Basic** programs have been embedded in existing pregnancy programs in communities across the country. Major initiatives in cities as diverse as Baltimore, MD; Cleveland, OH; Appalachia, VA and TN; and Rochester, NY reach every Medicaid eligible expecting woman with coordinated Baby Basics materials, and strength-based education. All **Baby Basics** Programs are self-sustaining, supported by health departments, foundations and partner agencies

In 2014, in partnership with the US Department of State's Office of Global Women's Issues, Lisa created and published **Big Belly Business** (Liberia) and **Babu Barta** (Bangladesh) pregnancy books, curriculum and group literacy education programming for the women of these two developing nations. She continues to advise on this project in partnership with the State Department, D.Net and the Open Society in West Africa (OSIWA), and in 2017 will take the Liberia program nationwide.

Lisa's new venture, **Simply Put draws** upon this expertise and her fifteen years in commercial book publishing. A former publicist at Henry Holt and Little Brown Publishers, Marketing Director at The New Press, and Associate Publisher at Workman (where she ran campaigns for the bestselling *What To Expect When You're Expecting* Series and *Brain Quest* educational program) she is eager to bring books and learning opportunities on a variety of topics into the lives of neglected audiences in the US and around the world.



# Big Belly Business

The Women's Health Innovation Program of Liberia



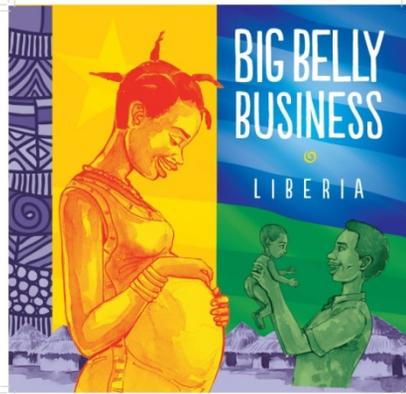
A partnership funded by  
The US State Department

Office of Global Women's Issues



## The Birth of a Book

50,000 delivered



*Big Belly Business* is a beautiful, evidence-based book about pregnancy written in simple Liberian English, filled with stories, health information and wisdom collected from across the country. Written by Liberian writers, and, joyously illustrated by Liberian artist Chase Walker, *Big Belly Business* is easy and fun to read. Those who can't read can learn in the Big Belly Club, or listen to the book on the radio or on a phone. A book, journal, and pencil are also free for "big belly women" in the program.



## Join the Big Belly Club

A group program of joyous learning & support

In the last year, 13 organizations across Liberia have brought together pregnant women, men and elders at



A Big Belly Club  
Tower Hill, Margibi County

over 100 Big Belly Clubs each week. Big Belly Sisters invite everyone to the club to talk, learn, laugh, and plan together for healthier pregnancies and safer deliveries.

The club uses the *Big Belly Business* book to find health information and stories, and the "framework" to ensure everyone has a chance to share, write or draw their own story – and ask, and discuss their own questions – together deciding what they want for themselves, their families and their community.



**Traditional Women United for Peace**  
Over 100 Liberians from 13 NGOs across the country are trained *Big Belly Sisters* or *Brothers*.



**Afromed** launched their program with what may be the biggest, Big Belly Club ever!

# BIG BELLY BUSINESS IS EVERYBODY'S BUSINESS

[www.simplyputmedia.org/bigbellybusiness.org](http://www.simplyputmedia.org/bigbellybusiness.org)

Hear the **Big Belly** audio on our website!



# Big Belly Business

The Women's Health Innovation Program of Liberia



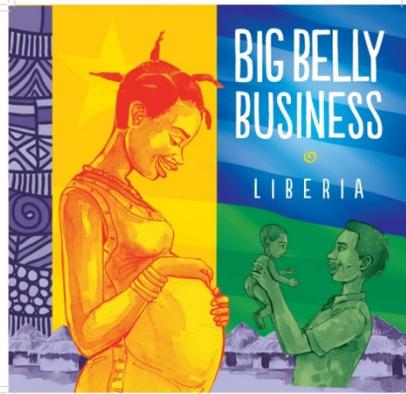
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# Big Belly Business

1

## FUNDING:

In 2014 the US State Department Office of Global Women's Issues funded the What To Expect Foundation to create the Women's Health Innovation Program in Liberia and Bangladesh.

2

## The Pilot (at a glance)

## CREATING:

A team of US and Liberian editors, artists, educators and writers created the Big Belly Business book, framework and training program. They identified Liberian NGOs who could implement the program and helped them apply to the State Department for small grants of book, training and funds to run Big Belly Clubs.

In 2015, 50,000 copies were delivered to the Liberian port.

3

## IMPLEMENTING:

The State Department chose The Open Society In West Africa (OSIWA) to house the Liberian Big Belly team and partner with INGO Simply Put (the team that created the book and program) to train and support implementing partners. In November 2015 Big Belly Sisters and Brothers were trained, and partners were funded to launch Big Belly Clubs.

## Those partners are:

Africare, AfroMed, Hope For Women International, Rescue Our People, Life Line Liberia, The Lutheran Church of Liberia, New Narratives, Obaa's Girls, Peace Clinic, PHIL, POCAWHAIN, Save the Children, The Sirleaf Market Women's Fund, THINK, Todhe Resource Center, Traditional Women United For Peace, United Church of the World, War Affected Women Education Empowerment Program (WAWEEP)

**Media Partner:** New Narratives



7  
Counties with  
Big Belly Clubs  
marked with a

50,000  
Copies of  
Big Belly Business  
journals &  
pencils

18  
NGO Partners

117  
Trained Big Belly  
Sisters &  
Brothers

7,500  
Big belly women  
& men

100  
Big Belly Clubs  
Each week

# BIG BELLY BUSINESS IS EVERYBODY'S BUSINESS

[www.simplyputmedia.org/bigbellybusiness](http://www.simplyputmedia.org/bigbellybusiness)

[www.OSIWA.org](http://www.OSIWA.org)

# THE LAUNCH EVENT

In August 2016 we celebrated the program's rollout with singing and stories by women in Big Belly Clubs, testimonies and certification of Big Belly Sisters and Brothers, and endorsement speeches by Government Officials from the Ministries of Gender, Health and Education and partner NGO leadership.



## Comments from Liberian Leaders

“Our people die from things that they should not die from. We will need more copies of this book, because once you open it, you have to share that information. **They will find really great improvement when the evaluation comes.**”



Rosana Schaack (left), ED of THINK receiving BB Sister Certification from Big Belly Board Chair, Dr. Wilhelmina Jallah.



Julia Duncan Cassell,  
Minister of Gender & Development

“We are proud of this initiative and delighted to be collaborating with other Ministries. This book is so simple it makes it so easy that anyone can read it. It is important that pregnant women know they can go back to school. **I hope to expand this program to all the 15 counties.**”



“On behalf of the Ministry of Health of Liberia it is our sincere desire to see that the Big Belly Business books, club, and program are made available to all expecting women in Liberia.”



Midwife Gracious Meapeh and Big Belly Sister Ma Marie run Big Belly Clubs across Handii, Bong County

“It was hard for us to get the pregnant women to come to the Maternal Waiting Home. We used to get about three to four persons... but now because of the Big Belly Club we get fifteen to eighteen a month. **Since the Big Belly Clubs start we have not had any maternal death.**”

# Voices from Big Belly Clubs

**“I do not want this program to stop.** Because the different thing is educating us to know we should take care of ourselves, how we should take care of our babies, and how our husbands should take care of us. My husband reads the Big Belly book to me. To him, I am now the chicken’s egg. **Things cannot change in one day but small, small they are changing. So I thank you.”**



Leyla Cooper, a member of Africare’s Bong County Mom’s Club has had 7 pregnancies and 2 surviving children. She and her husband have started weekly savings with help from her Big Belly Sister to pay for any emergency costs and have moved to town so they are close to a hospital.



“I felt very disappointed in myself. I had decided after High School I would get an education. But I got pregnant. **Because of the courage I got from this program I am back in school to become a nurse.”**

Princess Millmouno ,a former member of the Baby Ma Village Big Belly Club is now a trained Big Belly Sister.

“We go to the Big Belly Club because we learn together. **But also, it is fun to make friends.** The stories in the book made us not want to stop talking.”



King Gray Village has a vibrant Big Belly Club.

**“Now I can write my name** and I am learning to read and take care of myself as a pregnant woman. This is my second child. There is so much I did not know before about how my body worked.”



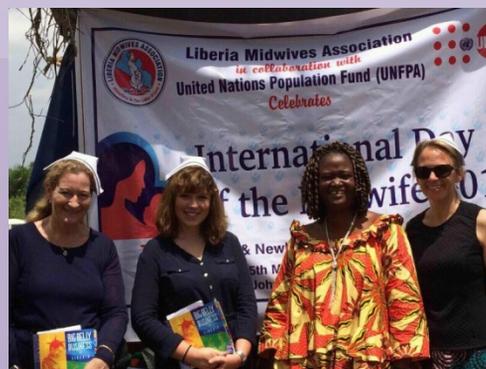
Musu Tamba, a member Traditional Women United for Peace’s Big Belly Club is holding a Big Belly Journal where she’s written her name, and her baby’s.



# BIG BELLY FUTURES...

## EVALUATE

- ✓ The Open Society Foundation has commissioned an independent 3 month evaluation of the Big Belly Business Program that will launch in October.
- ✓ A **Technical Working Group** will oversee the evaluation, led by Dr. Joseph Kerkula, the Director of Family Planning at the Ministry of Health, and comprised of the MOH Director of Community Health, Health Promotion, Health Research, and representatives from the Ministries of Gender and Education, UNICEF, WHO, UNFPA, UNESCO and UNWomen.
- ✓ Using Community-based participatory Research and Implementation Research theories, evaluation will not “grade” the program. It will inform BBB growth and innovation!



## ↑ INNOVATE

- ✓ The **Big Belly Business** book has been adopted as a textbook in the National Liberian Midwifery Curriculum and will be used to teach health communication, community engagement, social determinants of health, respectful maternal care and health literacy theories to every new midwifery student.
- ✓ **A PARTNER INNOVATION:** Big Belly Clubs will build a savings plan program to help families save weekly for unexpected delivery costs or emergencies. This idea came from our partner programs and is one of many ways our partners agencies, moms and dads are building the program THEY want.
- ✓ The revised *National Community Health Services Strategic Plan* includes home visiting and group education and **Big Belly Business** will be incorporated into that national plan as well as into clinical quality improvement work.

## REPLICATE

- ✓ Family Health Division Director, Dr. Joseph Kerkula brings the Big Belly team to meet with Liberian Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Francis Kateh. Together we envision replicating the Big Belly Business program across Liberia in 2017.
- ✓ July 2017 the State Department pilot ends, and Big Belly Business leaves the friendly OSIWA home and transitions to Simply Put Media/Big Belly Business. We hope to find an International NGO to share and house our mission and program!



PUBLISHING & PROGRAMMING FOR CHANGE

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To learn more