YWCA Safe Spaces for Women and Girls: A Global Model for Change
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Introduction

Since its founding in 1855, the YWCA has provided safe spaces to women and girls in the heart of local communities.

This began with the first YWCA in London, which provided safe housing to young women coming to the city in search of employment during the Industrial Revolution and continues today in many forms. From emergency shelters for survivors of violence, to safe spaces for young women to discuss harmful traditional practices and cultural taboos, to support groups for women living with HIV, and inclusive and accessible spaces for women with disabilities, YWCAs are synonymous with safe space.

For the past 150 years, YWCAs have expanded safe spaces to reach over 25 million women, young women and girls in 120 countries. Providing access to economic, social, political, and cultural opportunities to fulfill their potential and actively contribute to the development of their community, country and world, YWCAs are providing spaces where women, young women and girls become champions of their rights and their lives.

This publication seeks to outline the defining characteristics of YWCA Safe Spaces as a model for creating lasting change in the lives of women and girls. This model builds upon the common purpose unifying YWCAs worldwide to “develop the leadership and collective power of women and girls around the world to achieve justice, peace, health, human dignity, freedom and care for the environment”. It has been informed by four years of intensive programming with young women in Sub-Saharan Africa, which has focused on building leadership to tackle complex issues related to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), including structural inequalities manifested not least in harmful traditional practices and cultural taboos around sexuality. This model brings together proven strategies for creating, promoting and expanding safe spaces and aims to be a relevant and practical tool for replication and scaling up within the YWCA movement and partner organisations.

Strategies that inform the YWCA Safe Spaces Model have been piloted and tested in sub-Saharan Africa, which has the highest adolescent fertility rate in the world, with girls under 16 years of age facing four times the risk of maternal mortality than women over the age of 20. There is a high unmet need for family planning and only 3% of the estimated 6.4 million abortions carried out in 2008 were considered safe. Harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM) exist in 28 African countries with three million girls at risk every year; and in some areas, the prevalence rate is 98% of the female population. The lack of adequate, accessible and youth friendly sexual and reproductive health services not only affect the educational and economic opportunities of present and future generations, but threaten their very survival. At the same time, these poor SRHR indicators are rooted in poverty and the lack of priority given to relevant services by governments in this context, as well as traditional norms and legal barriers based on colonial laws and religious beliefs.

Through the safe spaces model, YWCAs are creating a safe space for women, young women and girls to discuss taboo subjects without fear or judgment. These spaces are also designed to close the gap between policies and commitments at national, regional and international level and realities facing women in accessing services and making personal decisions. By creating an enabling environment that builds awareness of international commitments and provides opportunities and training for women, and particularly young women, to engage in direct dialogue with policy makers, we are building accountability and connecting policy making with the lived experiences of women, young women and girls in communities.

While this model has emerged from programming on sexual and reproductive rights in Sub-Saharan Africa, it is applicable in a global context where conservative forces around the world are undermining women’s human rights and rolling back gains made in 1994 through the International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action.

The model is also adaptable to broader programming designed to support women, young women and girls to claim their human rights in other spheres. It applies a human rights based approach to development and puts the fundamental principles of non-discrimination, empowerment and participation, and accountability, into daily practice. This model is also guided by the World YWCA Standards of Good Management and Accountability, which are an expression of the organisation’s commitment to modelling practice which exhibits quality, responsibility and accountability in the communities we serve.

Safe spaces are complex and dynamic physical and emotional environments that require constant caretaking. YWCAs strive to maintain unique women-led spaces that foster strength through leadership and solidarity towards one vital end: a world where the human rights of women, young women and girls are protected, respected and fulfilled.

YWCA Safe Spaces Model

Defining Elements and Best Practices

From the YWCA’s extensive experience working in the heart of local communities to advance women’s rights, empowerment and leadership, we have identified eight elements that are essential in creating safe spaces for women, young women and girls:

1. Partnership and Accountability
2. Leadership and participation
3. Accurate and reliable information
4. Building Trust
5. Holistic Approach
6. Intergenerational Co-operation
7. Dignity and Respect
8. Accessible and safe location

Each of these elements is crucial for building safe spaces where women, young women and girls can openly share their experiences and challenges, develop awareness of their human rights and build capacity to claim these rights as empowered leaders, decision-makers and change agents responding to the issues affecting their lives and communities. As a movement that has more than 150 years of experience working directly with women and girls and one that is women-led and rooted in the heart of local communities, the YWCA Safe Spaces Model is a proven best practice for advancing women’s rights in a culturally responsive context. An underlying principle is ensuring that women, young women and girls are at the centre of their own empowerment.

This document sets out a standard or benchmark for each of the eight elements that make up the YWCA Safe Spaces Model with key indicators that are essential to success. It is accompanied by a series of case studies which demonstrate how these principles have been put into practice through the YWCA’s efforts to mobilise young women’s leadership on sexual and reproductive rights and HIV in Africa.
Standard 1
Accessible and safe location:

YWCA are located in accessible areas, central and convenient to women, young women and girls, where safety and privacy are assured. They reach isolated communities through mobile outreach programmes, and extensive rural networks and prominent urban and rural visibility ensure awareness of YWCA activities.

Indicators:

- YWCAs are located near a market, church, school, police station or hospital/health centre
- YWCAs are easy to find and clearly identifiable in communities
- Issues of safety and accessibility are addressed in programme planning
- Programmes are held at times that are responsive to the needs of particular target groups (e.g. market sellers, in and out of school girls, domestic workers, mothers)
- YWCAs offer mobile outreach services in rural and remote areas that take vital services directly to locations where they are most needed

Standard 2
Leadership and participation:

YWCA are women-led spaces that offer inclusive and empowering spaces for women, young women and girls of all ages and in all their diversity. Leadership development and participation are essential components of YWCA programming, fostering a sense of solidarity and ownership that transforms a beneficiary into an active agent of change.

Indicators:

- Young women serve as peer educators and mentors for other young women and girls providing positive role models and examples of young female leadership, alongside mentors of other ages
- Programmes include opportunities that expand life experiences and promote personal growth among women, young women and girls
- YWCAs provide skills, knowledge and opportunities for young women to advocate for their rights directly with policy and decision-makers
- YWCAs are places where women, young women and girls gain self-confidence, develop leadership and become decision-makers in their own lives. Programmes are targeted to vulnerable groups of women, young women and girls (i.e. out of school girls, teenage mothers, women living with HIV, survivors of violence, domestic workers, victims of trafficking, migrants and indigenous women)
- Target groups are included in project planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation to ensure community relevance and ownership
- Young women are given opportunities and resources to develop and implement projects in their communities
Standard 3
Accurate and reliable information:
YWCA Safe Spaces for Women and Girls: Share and promote evidence-based information that supports women, young women and girls to make informed choices.

Indicators:
- Information about sexual and reproductive health and human rights is evidence based and provides factual, non-judgemental information that supports women, young women and girls to make informed decisions.
- Materials are reviewed by experts to ensure that they do not contain any negative stereotypes, discriminatory messages or moral judgements.
- Materials are accessible to different groups of women, young women and girls (i.e. offered in more than one language, adapted for illiterate women and women with disabilities, available in different formats).
- Efforts are made to ensure information is age-appropriate and relevant to target groups.
- YWCAs build the knowledge and skills of staff and volunteers to challenge harmful traditional practices in communities, such as early and forced marriage, female genital mutilation and violence against women and girls.

Standard 4
Building trust:
YWCA Safe Spaces for Women and Girls: Are places where women, young women and girls can openly share their experiences, challenges and traumas, and be assured of confidentiality and support.

Indicators:
- YWCAs are safe, inclusive and empowering spaces for women, young women and girls in all their diversity, particularly survivors of violence and women living with HIV.
- YWCAs form support groups in communities that enable women, young women and girls to share their experiences with their peers and access information about their rights and services.
- Staff and volunteers are trained to provide counselling and peer support.
- YWCAs provide a private space where a woman, young woman or girl can meet with a counsellor or mentor and talk about private or sensitive topics, including sexual and reproductive health issues.
- Personal information (especially concerning HIV status and experiences of violence) and identity is kept confidential.
- Staff and volunteers are trained on identifying, confronting and addressing all forms of stigma and discrimination (particularly related to but not restricted to religious beliefs, ethnic background, life situation, education, HIV status or sexual orientation).
- YWCAs are child safe employers and ensure that all staff working directly with girls have appropriate criminal and reference checks.
Standard 5
Holistic approaches:

YWCAs take into consideration the multiple facets of women’s lives and deliver services that respond to the life cycle of women, young women and girls. Education and economic empowerment are recognised as fundamental tools for empowerment, personal security and claiming rights.

Indicators:

- YWCAs are inspired by Christian principles and respect for the dignity of every human being
- YWCAs programmes promote non-discrimination and are open to women, young women and girls of all religious faiths and backgrounds
- YWCAs are a place for women, young women and girls to learn life skills that broaden opportunities and build self-reliance to prepare them for life’s economic, social and emotional challenges and strengthen their personal security
- YWCAs encourage active citizenship by fostering critical consciousness and decision-making
- YWCAs programming takes into account the different needs and realities of women, young women and girls at different stages of their lives
- The human rights of women, young women and girls are defended by the YWCA in private, public and political spaces
- YWCAs encourage and provide assistance to all girls, young women and women to complete and continue their education
- YWCAs promote and/or deliver initiatives that economically empower women, young women and girls (i.e. vocational skills training, financial and business management and small loans)
- YWCAs offer activities and space for unstructured social interactions and personal bonding that build informal support networks among women, young women and girls and promote dialogue and reflection

Standard 6
Intergenerational cooperation:

YWCAs encourage intergenerational sharing, mentoring and cooperation between women and girls of all ages. These supportive relationships are based on respect and equality among different age groups, with a focus on developing young women’s leadership.

Indicators:

- At a YWCA, a girl, young woman or woman can find a peer mentor or counsellor who is of a similar age or slightly older
- At a YWCA, women with more lived experiences take an active role in mentoring and guiding younger women
- YWCAs practice positive interpersonal relationships that foster respect for one another and acceptance of differences of lifestyle and opinion
- YWCAs ensure that a minimum of 25% of decision-making positions are held by young women 30 years or under
- YWCAs support the informed and meaningful participation of young women, ensuring that young women’s opinions are taken seriously and valued during decision-making
- YWCAs provide training, resources and space for young women to represent the organisation and the issues facing young women firsthand with policy makers at local, national, regional and international levels
Standard 7
Dignity and respect:

The organisational structure of YWCAs provides a local and global network of women, young women and girls who support and inspire one another. It is a place where women, young women and girls in all of their diversity are respected and their dignity and rights are upheld.

Indicators:

- YWCAs model transformative and shared leadership, which encourages participation, collective efforts and common ownership for creating positive change among individuals and society
- YWCAs build a sense of common identity and purpose between women, young women and girls at local, national, regional and global levels
- YWCAs create a sense of belonging and make women, young women and girls feel valued and respected
- YWCAs are places where friendships and support networks are formed
- YWCAs are inclusive spaces, free of judgement, for women, young women and girls in all of their diversity

- YWCAs champion women’s human rights, including sexual and reproductive rights and freedom from violence, in local health centres/hospitals, police stations, schools and government offices
- YWCAs use their institutional reputation, strength and legitimacy to advocate for the human rights of women, young women and girls on local, national, regional and global platforms
- YWCAs provide the necessary training and support and open up space for women and young women from vulnerable groups to exercise their voice and agency at relevant local, national, regional and international policy spaces.
Standard 8
Partnership and Accountability:

YWCA’s are part of their communities and are permanent, reliable and sustainable spaces for women, young women and girls. They work in partnership with local, regional and global actors to advance women’s rights and demand accountability from relevant duty bearers.

Indicators:

- The YWCA is a volunteer-led movement that promotes shared leadership with staff, values and respects members and beneficiaries and is sustained by community involvement.
- YWCA’s are community based and hold activities, meetings and programmes in various community spaces (e.g., schools, churches, community and YWCA centres, chief’s compounds, member’s homes).
- YWCA’s hold information sessions open to the public (parents, spouses, caregivers, service providers) to explain YWCA activities and encourage the participation of women, young women and girls.
- YWCA’s are hubs for sharing and channelling information to support women, young women and girls to claim their rights through clubs, peer education and peer support services.
- YWCA’s provide women, young women and girls with emergency contact information and services to support them in times of crisis (this may be a YWCA or community shelter or phone number of a YWCA leader who can provide rapid response).
- YWCA’s have established referral networks to youth friendly services including sexual and reproductive health services and violence support services.
- YWCA’s network, advocate and collaborate with civil society organisations, service providers and governments to achieve legal, policy and social change towards fulfilment of the human rights of women, young women and girls.
- YWCA’s are welcoming places for partner organisations, where sharing of experiences, expertise and resources is promoted.
- As a well-established NGO, the YWCA supports emerging sister associations in their growth and development, particularly those representing vulnerable groups.
- YWCA’s partner with other YWCA’s and organisations at the local, national, regional and global levels to further the human rights of women, young women and girls and demand accountability for global commitments.
- YWCA’s receive a small amount of funds from their membership and income generation activities, which builds local sustainability and lessens reliance on external funding.
- YWCA’s model good governance and management through their compliance with the World YWCA Standards of Good Management and Accountability.
YWCA Safe Spaces for Women and Girls:

Country Context

Angola is a post-conflict country, struggling with high levels of inequality, poverty and violence. Widespread violence against women and girls (VAWG) and harmful traditional practices further place young women and girls at risk of early pregnancy, STIs and HIV infection, and maternal mortality. The adolescent fertility rate in Angola is higher than the Sub-Saharan African average, as 28.6% of young women aged 15-19 have already started child bearing.1 Furthermore, rural, poor and uneducated women and girls face even higher rates of unwanted pregnancies and maternal mortality. Angolan young women, aged 15-24, have a higher HIV prevalence rate compared with young men of the same age. Discriminatory gender roles and patriarchal social constructs disadvantage girls, curtail their education and place their SRHR at risk. Angolan women, young women and girls face daily challenges to protect their SRHR and exercise their human rights to a life of dignity and to live free from violence.

Evidence of Change

The YWCA of Angola puts young women’s leadership into practice, as 75% of YWCA National Board members are under the age of 30 years. In the last two years, approximately 240 young women have been trained to champion SRHR, with 20 young women actively mentoring local youth groups and 45 volunteers involved in community support groups and counselling, as part of a larger ‘Network of Hope’ around HIV testing and care giving.

Young women and girls are leading the highly successful and popular Girls Building Bridges Project. Based on girl-led life skills and SRHR training, this project has won awards and been identified by UNFPA as a best practice on working with young women and girls on empowerment and SRHR. While gaining leadership skills, girls also share difficult experiences in a girl-only safe space such as sexual...
abuse by teachers or dealing with an unwanted pregnancy. In Angola, girls are helping girls be prepared and confident to confront and overcome the many challenges they face.

Another example of successful YWCA programming began with YWCA members referring young women to a local health clinic for SRH services and counselling pregnant women before and after HIV testing. Collaboration with the Ministry of Health was so successful that the YWCA and health clinic now have a reciprocal referral system and the YWCA provides counselling services five days a week to people tested for HIV, further strengthening the YWCA programming ties between SRHR and HIV.

Challenges

Most parents are not supportive of their daughters discussing sex and reproductive health issues and many refuse to attend community meetings where this taboo subject will be discussed. In order to explain the purpose and benefits of the project, girls are encouraged to write letters to their parents. If resistance is still strong, YWCA volunteers and staff make home visits to persuade parents to change their attitudes and allow girls’ participation. Persistence and dedication to girls’ wellbeing has turned this challenge into a strength, further embedding the YWCA of Angola in the community and reinforcing its reputation as a safe space for young women and girls to discuss the challenges they face in relation to HIV and to claim their SRHR.

Partnerships

The YWCA of Angola is part of a wider civil society movement that successfully lobbied for the adoption of the law against domestic violence in 2011. The YWCA also plays a role in ensuring the implementation of this law, by training local police on SRHR issues and appropriate behaviour and procedures related to responding to VAWG. The YWCA partners with faith-based organisations such as the National Council of Churches and Norwegian Church Aid, in addition to a local civil society organisation (CSO), Anazo, the National Network on HIV and AIDS, UNFPA and others, to ensure coordination of efforts in responding to the needs and rights of those infected and affected by HIV and AIDS.

"I was very shy and did not like to defend myself or speak up. Now I am a mentor for girls, explaining HIV. I am a trainer in my community and have self-esteem.”

Good Practice from the YWCA Safe Space Model

The YWCA of Angola is located in a disadvantaged neighbourhood, making it an accessible and convenient location for vulnerable young women and girls. By reaching out to poor households the YWCA came in contact with Flavia, who at 14 years of age joined the first Girls Building Bridges project cycle. Following the visit of a volunteer, Flavia’s parents were encouraged to send her to the programme, and as Flavia explains “I was very shy and did not like to defend myself or speak up. Now I am a mentor for girls, explaining HIV. I am a trainer in my community and have self-esteem.” Through the YWCA, community-based girl-led networks are expanding and bringing essential information on SRHR and HIV and leadership skills to more girls every day.
Country Context

A girl in Benin can legally marry at the age of 15, which is 3 years younger than young men, and contrary to the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which stipulates 18 years for both women and men. Discriminatory customary laws deny women their human rights, forcing them into marriages they do not choose and denying them decision-making powers and dignity. Benin has a high adolescent fertility rate with 21.4% of young women aged 15-19 already bearing children. The rate of maternal mortality is also high at 350 deaths per 100,000 live births. Women in Benin are twice as likely to be infected with HIV than men, with survivors of violence, young women, widows, victims of trafficking and sex workers, particularly vulnerable to HIV. Although illegal, female genital mutilation (FGM) is common and is usually practiced on girls below the age of 5. In some regions and ethnic groups, up to 70% of girls have undergone FGM.¹

Evidence of Change

The YWCA of Benin has reached approximately 1800 community members (1000 young women and girls under the age of 30) with essential SRHR information and messages on HIV prevention and the elimination of VAWG. Through peer leadership and SRHR training, 33 young women leaders are creating safe spaces for young women and girls to prepare themselves with the skills and confidence to become agents of change in their communities and decision-makers in their lives. The girls’ groups are so popular that the number of...
participants is constantly growing. As one leader reported, “…we started with 15 girls but the girls bring their friends and family and each day there are more. We had to rent a tarp to put up outside so the group could meet”.

The YWCA’s inclusive and responsive programming is informed by the concerns of young women, and offers programming which supports them in positive life choices, such as voluntary HIV testing and counselling. Additionally, young women staff and volunteers from the YWCA of Benin have expanded their local leadership skills onto the global decision making stage, as many have attended international conferences and workshops focused on the SRHR of women, young women and girls. As YWCA delegates, these young women contribute their stories and opinions to the global dialogue on reproductive health, gender equality, VAWG, and HIV prevention and caregiving, and building their leadership and knowledge.

Challenges

Young women and girls do not have access to adequate youth-friendly health facilities, and traditional cultural beliefs discourage discussing SRHR issues with young people. Parents and guardians are not supportive of SRHR programming which they believe will lead to promiscuity and pregnancy. The YWCA of Benin reaches out to parents at the household level to explain the benefits of SRHR programmes for young women and works with various stakeholders to improve access to health services that safeguard the SRHR of girls and young women.

Partnerships

The YWCA of Benin collaborates widely with government service providers, local, national and international CSOs, and parliamentarians, bringing these stakeholders and others into contact and dialogue with young people. For example, a series of round table discussions have opened communication between young people and adults on issues related to HIV and AIDS, such as high risk sexual behaviour, discriminatory gender roles, social pressure and economic insecurity which put young people at risk of infection. The YWCA also offers HIV awareness and prevention workshops within some secondary schools through an agreement with the Ministry of Education, and continues to reach out-of-school young people through community out-reach programmes. The YWCA of Benin also collaborates with the Ministry of Health on the National Programme Against HIV and AIDS, is represented on the First Lady’s Programme on the Health and Rights of Women and works with UN agencies such as UNAIDS, UNICEF and UNFPA.

The YWCA of Benin includes village leaders in programmes that address harmful traditional practices and promote the SRHR of young people. Community support and acceptance of YWCA programmes increases the number of young women and girls involved in SRHR projects and improves the chances of young women becoming champions of their SRHR.

“…we have nothing, and it is thanks to the YWCA of Benin who covered my school fees and school materials, that I have had the opportunity of going to school and can hope to progress academically and have a better life”.

Good Practice from the YWCA Safe Space Model

The YWCA of Benin provides reliable information on HIV prevention, testing, care, and nutrition and supports young women living with HIV to live positively. YWCA workshops and counselling encourage and support young women to continue their education. Gracia, a young woman with HIV who lives with her grandmother explained, “…we have nothing, and it is thanks to the YWCA of Benin who covered my school fees and school materials, that I have had the opportunity of going to school and can hope to progress academically and have a better life”. Knowing their HIV status and SRHR is helping young women and girls in Benin make life decisions that offer a future of possibilities and opportunities.
YWCA of Ethiopia

Country Context

Ethiopia has a high maternal mortality rate of 350 deaths per 100,000 live births and the reported median age of marriage is 16.5 years for girls, although earlier marriages are not uncommon in poor rural households. Over their lifetime, women in Ethiopia have approximately 60% more children than they would wish to have, identifying a high unmet need for family planning. Young women and girls are not receiving the sexual and reproductive health (SRH) information or services they need to protect themselves from unwanted pregnancies, STIs and HIV infection.

A lack of reliable information is coupled with discriminatory gender roles and social pressures, which disadvantage girls, curtail their education and minimise their SRH decision making powers. Furthermore, widespread harmful traditional practices such as child and forced marriage by abduction and female genital mutilation, put young women and girls at further risk of maternal mortality, fistula and the consequences of unsafe abortion. Approximately 100 women die in Ethiopian health clinics every year from abortion related complications, a number that does not reflect the girls and young women who die because they are too afraid or simply unable to seek medical assistance.¹

Evidence of Change

The YWCA of Ethiopia reaches over 2000 disabled young women and girls and works closely with other civil society organisations and governments, to ensure accurate and accessible information (braille, sign language and audio cassettes) on SRH and HIV. The YWCA’s programming goes beyond providing information, as 40 young women with disabilities participated in leadership training on SRH and violence against women and girls (VAWG). They are now peer educators, facilitating a network of safe spaces for other disabled girls who have suffered violence in their homes and communities.
As her self-confidence grew so did her leadership skills and she became the team captain. Recently she was invited to the Family Planning Summit in London as a YWCA delegate, to address the British Prime Minister on the SRHR issues facing young women in Africa.

In a society where employment opportunities for people living with disabilities are almost non-existent, the YWCA supports over 30 young women through economic initiatives such as pottery and knitting, empowering them further to become decision-makers in their own lives and agents of change in their communities. In response to young women’s concerns about discriminatory attitudes and practices in community health clinics, the YWCA trained 30 local health workers on the provision of disability-accessible health services, further improving access to essential services such as contraception and HIV information.

Over the last 4 years, approximately 42,000 young Ethiopian women and girls have received accurate and reliable information on SRH and HIV. For example, a popular YWCA project provides female university students, a segment of the population identified as vulnerable regarding HIV infection, with an informative booklet that covers SRH topics including menstruation, dating and protection from STI and HIV infection.

Challenges

In spite of the fact that people living with disabilities often find their sexuality ignored, young women and girls with disabilities are more vulnerable to sexual exploitation and violence. Families and health providers ignore or actively discourage disabled women, young women and girls from making informed decisions about their SRH. The YWCA is helping change community attitudes through using radio, TV and other public awareness campaigns to speak out on VAWG and encourage SRH for all.

Partnerships

The YWCA is engaged with a diverse range of government service providers in the areas of health, education, justice, agriculture and development planning, in addition to working with UN Women and UN AIDS. With regards to working with people living with disabilities in combination with HIV awareness, the YWCA is part of an effort to coordinate the different organisations offering programs in this area.

Good Practice from the YWCA Safe Space Model

The YWCA of Ethiopia assists disadvantaged girls and young women, offering them opportunities to create a life of dignity and respect. Aselefe, a young woman from a poor household in Addis Ababa, found herself preparing to travel overseas with the promise of a job as a domestic worker, an opportunity that often leads to situations of labour and sexual abuse. Instead of going overseas, Aselefe joined a YWCA football team and proved to be an excellent athlete. In addition to sports skills, the team players strengthened their leadership abilities, were provided with SRHR information, and gained a sense of identity and belonging. As her self-confidence grew so did her leadership skills and she became the team captain. Recently she was invited to the Family Planning Summit in London as a YWCA delegate, to address the British Prime Minister on the SRH issues facing young women in Africa. From the pitch to the podium, Aselefe is an example of how life opportunities for young women can create inspiring leaders.
The YWCA of Kenya is the oldest women’s organisation in the country and has been developing the leadership and collective power of young women and girls for over 100 years. With seven branches throughout Kenya, the YWCA has country-wide coverage, reaching vulnerable populations such as teenage mothers, out-of-school girls and young women living with HIV. The YWCA of Kenya is a safe space for young women and girls to share experiences and information on their sexual and reproductive health and rights and to access transformative programming which fosters the skills they need to be decision-makers and agents of change in their lives and communities.

Country Context

With no sexuality education in schools and inadequate health services, young people, especially young women and girls, have limited access to SRHR information to protect their health and plan their futures. Lack of information about HIV, unequal gender roles, violence against women and girls (VAWG), and discriminatory social norms which constrain girls’ education and leadership, contribute to the high rate of HIV prevalence among Kenyan women in comparison to men (8% compared to men at 4.3%). Young women and girls are four times more likely to be infected than their male counterparts, partly due to being subjected to harmful traditional practices such as child and forced marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM). An estimated 30–40% of Kenyan women have undergone FGM, with rates as high as 90% depending on the ethnic group. Although FGM is illegal for anyone under the age of 18, the law is not upheld and a large number of girls undergo FGM, facing a high risk of fatal infections, physical and psychological trauma, increased susceptibility to HIV, and maternal mortality.¹

Evidence of Change

Through its peer education programmes in the Meru, Kisii, Ksumu and Siaya branches, the YWCA of Kenya has reached approximately 5,000 young women, both in and out of school, with SRHR and HIV information. Over 80 peer educators create safe spaces for discussions on topics ranging from STI, HIV and AIDS awareness, prevention and testing, to addressing harmful traditional practices and VAWG. To further strengthen a network of young people working on SRHR, the YWCA coordinates regional symposiums and has brought together 150 young women and other stakeholders to discuss SRHR challenges, propose solutions and collaborate on planning.

The YWCA of Kenya also works to strengthen the leadership and advocacy skills of young women and girls who are living with HIV. The YWCA’s HIV
Lillian is living positively with HIV, initiating income-generating projects, which allow her to support herself and her family...

programmes have trained 50 young women living with HIV to assert their SRHR. Quarterly education and information meetings have included a further 152 HIV positive young women in discussions on living positively with HIV and strategies for addressing stigma and discrimination in society and particularly, from health service providers. The YWCA of Kenya hopes to expand economic empowerment activities that currently support 10 young women with HIV to learn a vocational skill (computer skills, sewing, hairdressing and embroidery) and set up small businesses, therefore working towards their economic self-sufficiency and contributing to a life of dignity.

Challenges

Inadequate coverage of health facilities, a lack of skilled health workers and too few youth-friendly health centres, combined with cultural beliefs that discourage candid discussions about sexuality with young people, all hinder young women and girls, from accessing and safeguarding their SRHR. The YWCA of Kenya addresses this lack of information by providing Fact Sheets and training to young women and girls so that they can promote awareness of SRHR as peer educators and leaders in their communities. Due to its success, the YWCA has received many requests from communities to expand programming to reach more young women and girls, however financial restraints are an obstacle for scaling up programming.

Partnerships

Networking and collaborating with other civil society organisations and government has been very effective in complementing the YWCA of Kenya’s initiatives on SRHR and HIV. Regional symposiums involve several government partners, such as the Ministry of Health and Education, and the National AIDS Council, incorporating voluntary counselling and testing into a one-stop-shop event, which also provides information and referrals to those who require follow-up care.

Through involvement in the implementation of the Kenya Adolescent Reproductive Health and Development Policy, the YWCA partners with the Population Council, AIDS, Population and Health Integrated Assistance (Aphiaplus) and the German Foundation, among others, strengthening the network of civil society organisations (CSOs) and improving effectiveness of SRHR and HIV programming efforts, especially in the area of leadership and skills training for young women and girls.

Good Practice from the YWCA Safe Space Model

Lillian, a 23 year old mother of two, tested positive for HIV. Separated from her husband, she joined the YWCA of Kenya where building trust in a supportive and confidential space helped Lillian create her own support group of friends living with HIV. Lillian participated in the YWCA’s economic empowerment training and monthly SRHR information sharing and therapy sessions. She and the other 17 members of her group, now feel comfortable speaking openly about their HIV status and are ensuring that they receive adequate health care. Lillian is living positively with HIV, initiating income-generating projects, which allow her to support herself and her family and now. Thanks to her courage and perseverance, Lillian has “…hope to see [her] children achieve their dreams”.

Building Trust
The YWCA of Rwanda works to ensure that young women and girls have accurate information about their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). By providing safe and inclusive, non-judgemental and confidential spaces for young women and girls, a network of informed and empowered young leaders is helping confront and change widespread cultural taboos on SRHR. The YWCA of Rwanda also builds peaceful communities in a post-conflict country, working to address violence against women and girls (VAWG) and the stigma that affects people living with HIV.

Case Study: Mobilising Young Women’s Leadership on SRHR and HIV

YWCA of Rwanda

Country Context

The majority of Rwandans are under the age of 30 and yet only 9.4% of girls aged 15-19 have comprehensive knowledge of HIV.1 Given that sexuality education is not taught in Rwandan schools, girls and boys are unlikely to have the SRHR information and services they need to protect themselves and make informed decisions about their relationships and futures. There is a high unmet need for contraception among Rwandan women, who have 48% more children than wanted, with young women aged 15-19 particularly vulnerable to the SRHR consequences of this unmet need.2

The majority of Rwandan women, young women and girls suffer the physical, psychological, social and economic consequences of VAWG, with at least 56% of those women 15-49 years old having experienced physical or sexual violence at least once in their lifetime, with adolescent girls being at particular risk.3

Evidence of Change

Although recently established in 1995, the YWCA of Rwanda already has more than 1500 members and reaches approximately 20,000 people. Programmes are based in rural areas, reaching the most vulnerable young women and girls, including orphans, young women and girls from poor households, out-of-school children, and people living with or affected by HIV and AIDS.

The YWCA of Rwanda creates youth-friendly spaces through girls’ clubs, fostering the leadership of young women and preparing them with the skills and confidence to change their communities and their lives. Over 400 young women have been trained in SRHR. Girl-centered networks are growing in all districts where the YWCA is active. In addition to community-based leadership, Four YWCA National Board Members are young women, fulfilling a movement-wide mandate to actively recruit young women into
leadership positions and provide them with national and international opportunities to advocate for SRHR.

The YWCA of Rwanda has received many requests to extend SRHR and life skills programming for young people. As a result of research done in collaboration with Georgetown University, focusing on body awareness for girls and boys (aged 10-14 years), many children shared what they learned with their parents. Although initially wary of sexuality education, parents recognised the necessity of talking openly about SRHR with their children and local leaders have asked that the project be expanded.

**Challenges**

Rwanda is a post-conflict country where social trust and cohesion is being rebuilt. The YWCA of Rwanda is involved in peace building and reconciliation by specifically addressing VAWG and creating social cohesion among young people through leadership skills. In most cases, VAWG sensitisation is considered to be a threat to community customs and is not perceived as a crime. As a result, due to fear of social pressure, discrimination and stigma, victims of violence are reluctant to report cases. The YWCA of Rwanda addresses VAWG by reaching out to and coordinating with survivors, communities and other civil society organisations (CSOs).

**Partnerships**

The YWCA of Rwanda collaborates with local, national and international CSOs in addition to work with government service providers, planners and United Nations agencies. This many-pronged approach is evident in how the YWCA tackles VAWG. The YWCA works with health centres and hospitals, focusing on care for survivors of violence, while local partner organisations (RRP+ and Pro-Femmes Twese Hamwe) cover community sensitisation and advocacy. The YWCA also liaises with community police, which has been well received and reciprocated. Recognising that VAWG does not stop at national borders, the YWCA of Rwanda is part of a CSO network with Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo, coordinating activities with CSOs specialising in SRHR and working with people living with HIV. At the national level the YWCA is a member of the National Steering Committee on SRHR and has recently defended the legal age of marriage (presently 18 years) which is being questioned by groups interested in lowering the age of consent.

“girls in primary and secondary schools get pregnant and drop out. Those responsible for the pregnancies are our fellow students. Some of us are (even) raped or tricked by sugar daddies, but with the awareness we got, it will be difficult for them.”

**Good Practice from the YWCA Safe Space Model**

The YWCA of Rwanda excels at ensuring accountability and participating in multi-stakeholder partnerships to respond to the SRHR of women, young women and girls in their communities. Young women trained as peer educators on SRHR reported the need for information sessions that reach girls before they face sexual abuse or have their first sexual experience. Delphine, a 15 year old girl, told the YWCA, “girls in primary and secondary schools get pregnant and drop out. Those responsible for the pregnancies are our fellow students. Some of us are [even] raped or tricked by sugar daddies, but with the awareness we got, it will be difficult for them.” The YWCA continues to expand its membership and networks to prepare Delphine and thousands of other girls, with the information and skills needed to protect and demand respect for their SRHR.
Country Context

Sierra Leone’s rate of adolescent fertility, 143 per 1000 live births, is higher than the Sub-Saharan Africa average, and maternal mortality is extremely high. Early sexual debut, female genital mutilation, and forced and child marriage are prevalent harmful traditional practices that threaten the SRHR of girls and young women and increase risk of HIV transmission. In Sierra Leone, there are an estimated 27,000 women aged 15 or older living with HIV, 4,300 children and 18,000 orphans due to HIV.

The UN estimates that every woman in Sierra Leone has experienced some form of violence. Traditional and religious attitudes perpetuate violence against women and girls (VAWG) and discourage open discussion of sexuality. Girls and young women have little control over their sexual and reproductive lives, nor are they able to make informed decisions, as they lack access to adequate information and quality SRHR services. The YWCA of Sierra Leone aims to support girls and young women as agents of change in their communities and decision-makers about their bodies and lives.

Evidence of Change

Over 60 trained peer educators (80% of whom are young women from both in-and-out of school) are using street theatre and creating safe spaces to encourage young people to discuss their SRHR. Since 2009, YWCA SRHR and HIV programming has reached approximately 2000 girls and young women and over 5000 people in total. The YWCA helps young people identify obstacles to SRHR and provides community platforms where young women and girls can work with others to find solutions that respect their culture and SRHR rights. Intergenerational community dialogues and radio programmes have engaged approximately 120 traditional leaders and chiefs, many of whom are changing the opinions of their peers and changing practices that are harmful to young women.
and girls in their communities. Furthermore, as more women and girls participate in YWCA programmes, the number of VAWG cases reported to Family Support Units has increased.

Challenges

Many community members, especially older religious men who are often authority figures, link SRHR programming to the promotion of promiscuity, unfaithfulness and prostitution. These men prevent their wives and daughters from accessing services for fear of the perceived negative effects. Some women and young women who secretly use contraceptives risk beatings and even banishment. The YWCA of Sierra Leone is creating safe intergenerational dialogue to promote the respect, protection and fulfillment of SRHR for women, young women and girls and expanding its outreach to religious leaders.

Another obstacle to ensuring SRHR is the lack of health services at the village level. To address the fact that most government services are located in district capitals the YWCA collaborates with Planned Parenthood through the use of mobile health clinics, helping ensure that rural populations have access to SRHR information and services.

Partnerships

The YWCA partners with the Network of HIV Positives of Sierra Leone, the Department of Justice and the National AIDS Secretariat to protect the rights of people living with HIV. The YWCA carries out home visits to assist PLHIV and provides referrals and shares information on SGBV cases with Family Support Units, including the Police and Ministry of Social, Family and Children’s Affairs, where victims of violence receive free medical and legal services.

The YWCA of Sierra Leone is active in policy formation as a member of the Women’s Forum, which successfully lobbied for progressive gender laws, raising the legal age of marriage, recognising equal inheritance rights for women and making domestic violence a criminal offence, in addition to pushing for the Sexual Offences Act which criminalises rape. The YWCA also participates in the implementation of the Strategic Plan on the Reduction of Early Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy.

Additionally, partnering with other African YWCAs has been a significant leadership opportunity for many young women, as they have came together to produce Her Future: The Future Young Women Want and the regional equivalent, African Renaissance, which clearly outlines young women’s recommendations for the development agenda beyond 2015.

Good Practice from the YWCA Safe Space Model

The YWCA of Sierra Leone helps build intergenerational cooperation around the SRHR of young women and girls. Mariatu is a 16 year old girl, whose teacher identified her as a potential leader. Her mother had never spoken to her about sex, sexuality or reproduction, but after the YWCA SRHR training, Mariatu shared information with her mother. Mariatu’s mother recognised the usefulness of the training and asked to be involved in the YWCA’s programme. She even participated in a local radio discussion on girls’ SRHR and has herself become an advocate in her community, reaching out to older women and men to allow their daughters to access such empowering information. Mother and daughter now talk freely and comfortably not only about a topic that used to be taboo, but also about their plans and projects to empower more women and girls in their community.
The YWCA of Tanzania is dedicated to empowering women, young women and girls and promoting their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). The YWCA provides safe spaces and reliable information for vulnerable girls and young women and works with government and civil society organisations (CSO), to tackle the social, economic, and cultural barriers to SRHR.

Country Context

Tanzania’s population is young, yet despite government SRHR policies focused on adolescents, young people’s SRHR are threatened by a lack of access to appropriate and quality SRHR and HIV youth-friendly services. Tanzanian women, young women and girls suffer the consequences of inadequate SRHR information and services, and are at risk of unwanted pregnancies, STIs and HIV infection, unsafe abortions and maternal mortality. Adolescent fertility is high in Tanzania with 23% of 15-19 year olds already bearing children, and this rate is above 50% for young women with no education. Early pregnancy is a leading cause of girls dropping out of school and contributes to high rates of maternal mortality and unsafe abortions. Although maternal mortality rates have dramatically decreased since 1990, they remain high at 460 deaths per 100,000 live births. Furthermore, Tanzanian girls and young women are at risk of harmful traditional practices such as child and forced marriage, female genital mutilation and other forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG).

Evidence of Change

YWCA trainings have empowered young women and girls to be active citizens who identify SRHR challenges and the related gaps in government services and policies. Approximately 1,200 adolescent girls have been creating safe spaces, where they meet and increase their self-esteem through mutual support and information sharing. The YWCA of Tanzania has received over 60 invitations to facilitate SRHR and VAWG information sessions in various communities. As local media has recognised the YWCA’s leadership in this area and invited representatives to speak on these issues, young women and girls are breaking the silence and demanding their SRHR.

At YWCAs around the country, leadership training has empowered young women to propose ideas, implement projects and mobilise in support of their
SRHR. The YWCA of Tanzania commemorated Youth Day and the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence by mobilising 500 young people in different locations. YWCA of Tanzania’s programming on SRHR reaches approximately 3000 girls and young women under the age of 18, and local demand for girls’ programming is increasing.

Change can also be measured on the scale of one individual’s life: Mesero was 13 when she was forced into a marriage with a man over 70. By 29 she was a mother of 5 children. Beaten by her husband and forced by her family to remain in a violent relationship, Mesero decided to escape to the city, where she was supported by the YWCA. Through counselling, workshops and friendships she gained self-confidence and was able to develop ways of economically supporting herself and her family. She returned to her village and set up a YWCA in order to challenge local traditional practices like forced marriage, and create a community where girls’ SRHR are respected and young women can plan their futures.

Challenges

The fact that key stakeholders and decision-makers, such as government officials, service providers, community leaders, and also family members, can be perpetrators of SRHR violations, puts girls and young women at risk and impedes their advancement. To improve accountability, the YWCA creates effective partnerships to monitor and hold government accountable and strengthens young women’s knowledge and confidence to defend themselves. The YWCA of Tanzania also faces the constant challenge of responding to a high demand for SRHR programming with inadequate financial resources. In addition, there is also increased requests for similar programmes for boys, with a focus on confronting gender discrimination, changing expectations of masculinity and eliminating VAWG.

Partnerships

Through involvement with YWCA programmes, young women and girls realise that they are part of a large network of individuals and organisations working for the SRHR of girls and young women, and that they can be leaders in advocating for their human rights. For example, advocacy for girls’ education and a safe educational environment is carried out in partnership with the organisation Haki Elimu, by promoting community engagement to transform schools. Work to end child and forced marriage has young women and girls from the YWCA involved with the Tanzania Network for Ending Child Marriage and collaborating with the Legal and Human Rights Centre to review laws, customs and traditions that place women, young women and girls at risk.

The YWCA’s VAWG programmes work with Women in Law and Development in Africa and the Women Legal Aid Centre in providing legal services for survivors of violence. They are also reaching out to faith-based organisations to promote religious teachings that respect and value girls, change beliefs regarding masculinity, and work towards eliminating cultural and traditional practices that perpetuate VAWG. The YWCA works with selected government health facilities to provide referrals and the provision of free SRHR services and information.

Tanzanian girls and young women who know their rights, are now standing up for these rights, and denouncing practices that threaten their SRHR and their future.
Country Context

Zambia’s adolescent fertility rate, at 151.1 per 1000 live births, is higher than the regional average. The percentage of Zambian young women aged 15-19 who have already started child bearing is 27.9%, and even higher for poor, rural and uneducated young women. The age of sexual debut for girls is estimated at 12 years. Due to these and other factors, Zambia has a high maternal mortality rate of 440 deaths per 100,000 live births.1 Zambia young women and girls are at risk of harmful traditional practices such as child and forced marriage, and gender based violence. Their SRHR are further threatened by a lack of access to appropriate and quality SRHR and HIV youth-friendly services and information. UNAIDS reports that HIV prevalence in Zambia remains high among young people (10-24 years old), and young women aged 15-19 have a higher rate of infection compared to men of the same age (6% and 4% respectively).2 HIV infection rates also vary depending on geography, as HIV prevalence ranges from 6.8% in the Northern Province to 20.8% in Lusaka.3

Evidence of Change

As a result of the YWCA’s SRHR programming over 7,000 community members (4,335 of whom are young women) have been sensitised to SRHR, VAWG, and HIV and AIDS prevention and care. Positive behavioural change is evident in the fact that many young women have demanded that potential partners be tested for HIV prior to marriage. Some girls and young women, who have participated in YWCA peer education programmes, have refused forced and early marriages, pursued their right to SRH information and services, and denounced cultural practices that put them at risk of early and forced sexual debut. One girl, who had learned about HIV and the importance of voluntary testing, asked her parents to ensure that the man they had chosen as her husband was tested for HIV. The girl successfully argued for her right to freely choose her partner and that her SRHR were at risk if...
Zambian young women are becoming comfortable on the local and global stage to demand their SRHR and improve access to services in their communities.

she was forced to marry him. Through YWCA safe spaces and evidence-based SRHR information, young women and girls are learning and exercising their human rights.

Furthermore, targeted community interventions have included working with traditional leaders and initiators to raise awareness of SRHR, especially for young women and girls. Many traditional initiators have agreed to change the age of sexual initiation practices from 9 to 18 years of age, and to adapt traditional practices to better promote the SRHR of girls and young women. Additionally, young women’s mobilisation in one YWCA community has led the Zambian government to launch a campaign to end child, early and forced marriage. Community leaders and national decision-makers are responding to the increased local and international pressure to protect, respect, and fulfill the SRHR of Zambian young women and girls.

Challenges

To ensure that girls and young women are decision-makers in their own lives, service provision, gender roles, sexual behaviour, and cultural norms must change, but these shifts in attitude and practice take time to negotiate and promote. The YWCA has a permanent presence in Zambia and is committed to sustaining and expanding programmes on SRHR and empowering girls and young women in their communities.

Partnerships

The YWCA of Zambia has an extensive network of partners including government, civil society organisations (CSOs) and United Nations agencies. The YWCA collaborates with the Ministries of Gender and Child Development, and Community Development and Mother and Child Health to influence public policy and resource allocations. It facilitates reporting of sexual abuse and other VAWG cases to law enforcement (Victim Support Units) and refers young women to district and provincial health centres for HIV testing and contraceptives. The YWCA also works with District Education Boards to promote comprehensive sexuality education in schools.

To promote greater effectiveness and coherence across service providers in Zambia, the YWCA coordinates with other international and national CSOs and is actively engaged in national coalitions. For example, the YWCA works closely with SAFAIDS to integrate reproductive health into the national HIV and AIDS policy. It is also working as part of a coalition to promote SRHR for vulnerable groups including women with disabilities, women living with HIV, young people, and sex workers. The coalition operates in three provinces (Lusaka, Central and Southern) and includes Young Women in Action, Zambia National Traditional Counsellors Association, Youth Vision Zambia, among others.

Good Practice from the YWCA Safe Space Model

The YWCA of Zambia excels at promoting Young Women’s Leadership and Participation among vulnerable groups. Young women and girls receive training from the YWCA that supports them to implement projects that improve access to information and services on SRHR while empowering them as decision-makers and agents of change. Through the YWCA, young women living with HIV have set up support groups and survivors of violence are speaking out against violations. Young women leaders have advocated for their SRHR at regional and global events in Ethiopia, Indonesia, Namibia and the USA. Zambian young women are becoming comfortable on the local and global stage to demand their SRHR and improve access to services in their communities.
YWCA of Angola

1 World YWCA and ARROW, Sub-Saharan Africa Regional Fact Sheet, reclaiming and redefining rights: setting the adolescent and young people SRHR agenda beyond 2014

YWCA of Benin


YWCA of Ethiopia


YWCA of Kenya


YWCA of Rwanda

1 YWCA Power to Change Project Proposal 2012 (Rwanda Demographic Health Survey, 2010).

YWCA of Sierra Leone


YWCA of Tanzania


YWCA of Zambia

5 WLSA, Young Women in Action, TASINTHA, Zambia National Traditional Counsellors Association, IOY, TALC, WILDAF and Youth Vision Zambia.

The World YWCA is a global network of women leading social and economic change in 125 countries worldwide. It advocates for peace, justice, health, human dignity, freedom and care of the environment, and has been at the forefront of raising the status of women since it was founded in 1894.

The World YWCA develops women’s leadership to find local solutions to the global inequalities women face. Each year, it reaches more than 25 million women and girls through work in 22,000 communities.

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