



INVESTING IN ADOLESCENT GIRLS' AND YOUNG WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP AND VOICE IN THE HIV RESPONSE

CASE STUDIES AND EXPERIENCES



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INTRODUCTION

In sub-Saharan Africa in 2022, six in seven new HIV infections among adolescents aged 15–19 years were among girls, while girls and young women aged 15–24 years were twice as likely to be living with HIV than young men. Many factors, including harmful social norms, lack of negotiating power, gender-based violence and inequitable access to education and economic opportunities contribute to their disproportionate share of new HIV infections in the region.

On the occasion of the 66th session of the Commission on the Status of Women in 2021, the United States President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (UN Women) announced a partnership for 'Investing in Adolescent Girls and Young Women's Leadership and Voice in the HIV Response.' The joint collaboration focuses on two main goals:

1. Empower adolescent girls and young women, in all their diversity, to demand non-discriminatory HIV prevention, treatment and care services, as well as essential services for responding to gender-based violence.
2. Engage decision makers for policy change and the inclusion of the diverse voices and perspectives of adolescent girls and young women.

With additional support and oversight from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), the eighteen-month programme was implemented in 15 countries across sub-Saharan Africa where adolescent girls and young women experience some of the highest rates of HIV risk and infection globally. Programme countries included Botswana, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Eswatini, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Between 2021 and 2023, adolescent girls and young women in these countries were provided with support to strengthen their leadership and advocacy skills through mentorship and engagement with established women leaders. By amplifying the voices of a diverse set of mentors and mentees, the programme sought to effect change through policy influencing and to create a more enabling environment for young women to access HIV services and claim their rights.

CASE STUDIES APPROACH

UN Women applies a 'gender lens' to the Social Ecological Model of health-related behaviours to understand how gender and gender inequality plays a role in women's and girls' health and their ability to access vital services. This model considers the complex interplay between different factors that prevent adolescent girls and young women from demanding and realising their rights and illustrates why a multi-level and multi-sectoral approach is needed to ensure they can access the information and services they need to stay healthy and safe.

The case studies presented in this report reflect programme interventions at the five different levels of the Social Ecological Model.

Enabling Environment: Access To Decision-Making Spaces

- Elevating young women's leadership and participation in the HIV response at all levels
- Bringing women's networks into spaces of influence
- Advocacy and policy influencing in national, regional and global fora
- Accountability for resourcing and implementing programmes for and with young women

Organizational: Cross-Movement Building

- Building strategic alliances between feminist, youth-led and HIV movements
- Creating joint advocacy platforms and social media campaigns

Community: Intergenerational Dialogues

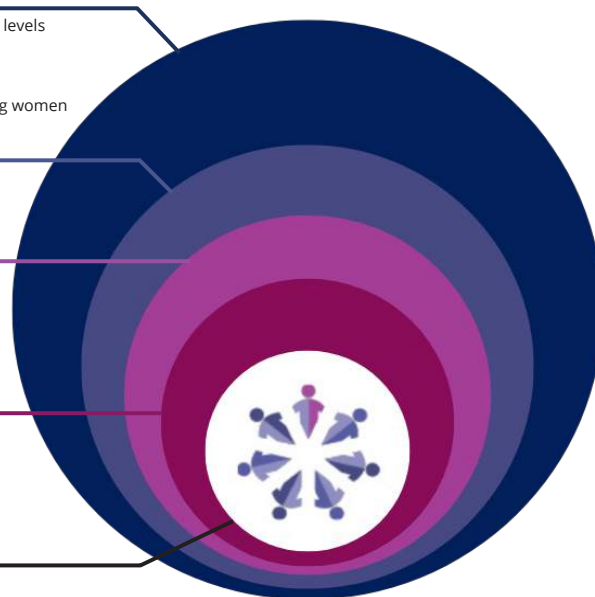
- Experience sharing on access barriers to HIV services faced by young women
- Open dialogue with community leaders
- Direct engagement between young women and service providers
- Fostering intergenerational solidarity

Peer Networks: Feminist Mentorship

- Intergenerational mentorship model
- Individual and group mentoring
- Peer solidarity, mutual learning and support
- Strategies to challenge patriarchal norms

Individuals: Feminist Leadership

- Knowledge
- Communication skills
- Beliefs and values
- Self-care tools
- Perceived norms
- Concepts of power



Adapted from: Health Communication Capacity Collaborative (HC3). (2016). *Integrating Gender into Social and Behavior Change Communication: An Implementation Kit*

CASE STUDY 1: OUR FUTURES, OUR VOICES

BUILDING FEMINIST LEADERSHIP SKILLS TO ADVANCE
GENDER EQUALITY IN THE HIV RESPONSE



THE ISSUE

Reducing incidence among adolescent girls and young women is vital to eliminating HIV infections, attaining the UNAIDS 10-10-10 targets¹ and achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 3 and 5 on ensuring healthy lives and gender equality, respectively.

Globally, biological, socio-economic, cultural and religious factors intersect to put adolescent girls and young women at a disproportionately high risk of HIV infection.² This holds in sub-Saharan Africa, where unequal power dynamics between genders increase the HIV vulnerability of adolescent girls and young women, deprive them of the ability to make decisions regarding their own lives, reduce their access to health services and increase their risk of experiencing violence or other harms.³

“The world will not be able to defeat AIDS while reinforcing patriarchy. The only effective route map to ending AIDS and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals is a feminist route map.”

Winnie Byanyima, UNAIDS Executive Director,
29 November 2022

Due to unequal gender norms and practices, adolescent girls and young women face significant barriers in accessing life-saving HIV services. These include violence and fear of violence, harmful practices such as child marriage, unpaid care work responsibilities, lack of access to education, lack of economic opportunities and resources and gender-based discrimination.

Although adolescent girls and young women in sub-Saharan Africa are disproportionately affected by HIV, they are often the strongest advocates and leaders in the response at local, national and international levels. Ensuring they know their rights and have both the skills and opportunities to claim them is crucial to removing barriers and addressing the inequalities that prevent progress towards the United Nations goal of ending AIDS as a public health threat by 2030.

“Resolute and determined, young women and girls demonstrate every day what leadership is and the lasting impact they can have [...] Girls and young women have the passion, energies and capabilities needed to meet global goals to reduce HIV infection rates. To influence decisions that affect their lives, young women’s rights to effective participation should be guaranteed and institutionalised.”

Sima Bahous, UN Women Executive Director,
1 December 2022

Increased investments in women’s leadership forms a critical component of this feminist approach. Establishing safe and empowering spaces, through mentorship and leadership training programmes, enables young women to strengthen their individual skills and agency, building their confidence to confront gender-based discrimination, negative stigma and stereotyping wherever they encounter it. This empowers them to advocate for their needs and rights and engage more effectively in the HIV response.

Adolescent girls and young women aged 15 to 24 years are three times more likely to acquire HIV than adolescent boys and young men of the same age group in sub-Saharan Africa. The driving factor is power.

Dangerous inequalities: World AIDS Day report 2022. UNAIDS.

THE APPROACH

A focus of the UN Women-PEPFAR programme is to invest in the leadership development and mentorship of adolescent girls' and young women so that they have the skills, power, voice and agency to make informed decisions about their health and demand access to non-discriminatory HIV services.

Since its formation, UN Women has championed gender-transformative interventions to reduce gender inequities and shift power dynamics. In the field of health and HIV, this means investing in approaches that address the root causes of gender-based health inequities through interventions that challenge and redress harmful gender norms, roles and unequal power relations that privilege men over women.

Grounded in feminist principles, these actions are meant to confront and transform the values, practices

and institutions that perpetuate gender stereotypes, discrimination and violence against women and girls. Feminist leadership is a powerful tool to drive this transformation. At its heart, feminist leadership is about making undemocratic, untransparent and asymmetrical power relations and dynamics visible, and then attempting to transform or disrupt them.

For the programme and its participants, this meant taking a hard-headed look at the economic, social and political systems across sub-Saharan Africa that perpetuate inequalities that put adolescent girls and young women at a disproportionately high risk of HIV infection.

WHAT IS FEMINIST LEADERSHIP?

Transformative feminist leadership refers to people with a feminist perspective and vision of social justice who are individually and collectively transforming themselves to use their power, resources and skills in non-oppressive, inclusive structures and processes. Transformative feminist leaders seek to mobilise others – especially other women – around a shared agenda of social, cultural, economic and political transformation for equality and the realisation of human rights for all.

Srilatha Batiwala, *Feminist Leadership for Social Transformation: Clearing the Conceptual Cloud*. 2010.

Leadership training delivered by UN Women and its partner, Gender at Work, explored gender and power analysis tools and frameworks, individual feminist principles, as well as principles of self and collective care. Based on the Feminist School approach developed by the UN Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) and Gender at Work, these explorations were informed by the lived experiences of the adolescent girls and young women who took part in the training.

Through the programme, different generations of feminist leaders from diverse backgrounds (financing, feminist principles, advocacy, HIV response, fundraising, gender specialists, among others) were invited to tell their stories and contribute to the leadership journeys of adolescent girls and young women. Storytelling is, and has always been, a powerful learning device. The programme used digital tools and resources to create a feminist space to share experiences, expertise,

journeys and challenges for both the participants and guest speakers.

Cohort learning emphasised the importance of collaboration, and small group teaching provided opportunities for the adolescent girls and young women to work collaboratively with their peers – developing teamwork and leadership skills.

Between June and September 2022, the UN Women-PEPFAR programme delivered six online training sessions in three languages (English, French, Portuguese) to 185 adolescent girls and young women activists from 15 countries. This included 89 PEPFAR DREAMS Ambassadors, 13 HER Voice Fund Ambassadors and 83 African Women Leaders Network Youth Caucus representatives.



A selfie moment with emerging young leaders, beneficiaries of a UN Women-PEPFAR programme on young women's leadership in HIV response. Photo credit: UN Women/Rashid Hamis Kindamba

"Before [the leadership training], I was shy; I had not realized the full potential of my voice in terms of empowering adolescent young girls around gender-based violence, child marriage and gender-based norms. I'm now more determined to become one of the most impactful women in my country."

Tanyaradzwa Makotore, 23-year-old participant and PEPFAR DREAMS Ambassador from Zimbabwe

THE NUMBERS

LEADERSHIP TRAINING FOR **185** YOUNG WOMEN FROM **15** COUNTRIES



49%
AGED 18-24 YEARS OLD



51%
AGED 25-34 YEARS OLD

6 ONLINE TRAINING SESSIONS DELIVERED

CONDUCTED IN **3** LANGUAGES

8 FEMINIST LEADERS AS GUEST SPEAKERS

THE RESULTS

In post-training surveys, adolescent girls and young women participants emphasised their individual and collective learning regarding feminist principles, leadership concepts, self-care tools and the approaches of new and emerging gender equality activists.

The participants reported an increased level of comfort with advocacy and communications tools, as well as a sense of sisterhood with one another.

"Feminist leadership training is powerful and insightful... [learning about] the various definitions of transformative leadership, feminist leadership, gender equality and toxic masculinity enabled me to internalise these concepts at a personal level."

Anonymous participant feedback

Most respondents ranked their confidence level 'very confident' across different concepts, tools and approaches. On a scale from 1 to 5 (1 being 'not at all' and 5 being 'very confident'), the average score range

is from 4.25 to 4.77. The participants suggested that they are most confident (4.77) with 'self-care practices,' followed by tools and approaches to 'address harmful gender norms' (4.72). Different elements of the course were identified by participants as being of most use to them, suggesting the varied course content offered something for everyone.

"I felt really enriched. I learned what transformational feminist leadership is all about and how to create a safe space for myself and others. I look forward to integrating these principles into my everyday life."

Anonymous participant feedback

The high level of confidence in self-care practices and power analysis tools are important indicators for young feminist activists, whose primary form of advocacy during the COVID-19 pandemic was confined to digital lobbying, with many reporting burnout and mental health issues between 2020 and 2022.

“

The leadership training itself has managed to equip me as an ambassador and help me perform my role better. Previously I did not have much information on feminist leadership and principles, as this information is very scarce to us who live in remote/rural areas. I will continue to identify key gaps and advocate within my community and nationally, challenging punitive laws that hinder our access as adolescent girls and young women in our diversity.

Bester Mulenje,
HER Voice Fund Ambassador, Zambia.
Photo credit: Y+ Global



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LESSONS LEARNED

Feminist leadership training creates open, safe and inclusive spaces for adolescent girls and young women to explore feminist principles, concepts of power, self-care tools and the root causes of gender-based health inequities.

Despite challenges in internet connectivity experienced by those joining from some countries or rural areas, participants' consistency in attendance and enthusiasm

throughout the course created a rich learning environment and demonstrated the relevance of online leadership training for young feminist activists. By the end of the course, adolescent girls and young women felt confident in applying their learnings to future campaigning and advocacy work to further their health and human rights.

"This type of training should be done more often. It's life changing. I feel empowered and ready for the world."

Anonymous participant feedback on UN Women's Feminist Leadership Training

FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

Adolescent girls and young women who participated in this programme expressed a strong desire for further opportunities to collaborate. Almost two-thirds of participants indicated a high likelihood of continuing their connections with one another, as well as with UN Women and its partners.

The UN Women-PEPFAR programme demonstrates how feminist leadership training can improve young women's capacity to engage with local communities and healthcare providers to influence decisions on HIV-related services in a way that advances gender equality and women's empowerment.

Going forward, the skills learned should enable them to elevate their voices with policymakers, helping to ensure the inclusion of programmes for adolescent girls and young women in national and sub-national plans and budgets.

In the interim, alumni of UN Women's leadership training are exploring ways of formalising a community of practice. Envisaged as a platform where young women activists can engage and collaborate with their peers, the community would help to share knowledge, best practices and effective advocacy strategies in demanding non-discriminatory access to HIV services.

HERSTORY IN THE MAKING:

MEET THE LEADERS CHAMPIONING CHANGE FOR WOMEN'S HEALTH AND RIGHTS

Rahma Seleman Jumanne

Rahma is a youth advocate and gender equality champion from Tanzania, a young women leader of the Education Plus Initiative's Nerve Center and member of the Restless Development Board of Directors. In 2022, Rahma participated in the UN Women-PEPFAR programme to strengthen the leadership and voice of young women in the HIV response.

What motivated you to step up and become a leader in your community?

Many people and experiences have shaped my leadership journey. My parents were a big influence. They always asked for my opinion and they involved me in decision-making at home. They encouraged me to engage, speak up and proactively seek out opportunities. I still recall my father saying "kiongozi huundwa," which is Swahili for "a leader is created." He always wanted me to be ready for opportunities and to follow my dreams and vision.

Two mentors had a significant impact on my life. They committed to support me and invest in my leadership journey and helped me thrive in my personal life, my work and as I pursued my advocacy efforts on behalf of other adolescent girls and young women. They provided me with opportunities to manage and lead others, coached me, gave me confidence and helped me realise my leadership potential. Even today, these mentors keep motivating me.

How have you built confidence as a leader who advocates for the health and rights of adolescent girls and young women?

Active learning, taking advantage of volunteering opportunities and exposure to advocacy have built my confidence as a leader. Showing initiative, seeking out new experiences and learning from others have honed my leadership skills. For example, working closely with adolescent girls and young women means you can learn about their diverse needs and lived experiences. This ensures you are representing their voices when you advocate for their issues within your organization or



Photo credit: Rahma Seleman Jumanne

with others. It also helps when you're designing sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) or HIV programmes or interventions.

Why do you feel having a mentor matters for young women who want to become leaders?

Mentors can nurture young women by helping them to develop qualities like critical thinking, curiosity, empathy, self-compassion and problem-solving. These are key skills for advancing gender equality, women's empowerment and SRHR within the HIV response. Mentors can help us access relevant support, critique and validate our ideas and perspectives, suggest ways to improve our leadership style and provide links to other networks of support.

I have had different experiences with mentorship. Not all have been successful and the mentorship relationship can be difficult in practice. However, mentorship still matters and having a mentor can be powerful for your life, especially for young women who aspire to be leaders.

What were some of the benefits of participating in the UN Women-PEPFAR programme? Did you experience any challenges?

I benefited most from the feminist leadership training and the experienced facilitators who conducted these sessions. I found the training highly participatory and enjoyed the interaction between guest speakers, facilitators and the participants. I was able to forge new connections, build relationships with other participants and form alliances to support joint advocacy on the health and rights of adolescent girls and young women. Topics such as feminist leadership and understanding the financial landscape surrounding the HIV response were particular areas of interest.

The UN Women-PEPFAR programme also opened doors for me to participate and speak at national, regional and international fora. These included the High-Level Meeting on Championing the Priorities of Women and Girls in the HIV Response, the 4th Annual Symposium of the ARISE Network, the 6th Annual Symposium on HIV Implementation Science and the 4th African Women Leaders Network (AWLN) Intergenerational Retreat for Economic Empowerment, Sustainability and Financial Inclusion. These events allowed me to exhibit my leadership, public speaking and advocacy skills, exposed me to new ideas and created important connections that will further my personal and professional growth. In these fora you often meet people who have different motivations and goals than your own. This has been a challenge; however, I've tried to see this as another opportunity to refine my advocacy skills and demonstrate my leadership qualities so that I can work with different people, address difficult situations and stay focused.

What advice would you give to the new generation of female leaders who want to speak up and claim their rights in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights and HIV?

You should be confident to speak up and never doubt the value of your contributions and ideas because you are smart and capable. It is important to be an active learner and invest in building your capacity and skills. Identify areas for improvement and then use your initiative to better yourself. For example, putting yourself forward for training or enrolling in programmes that will help you pursue your goals. This helps you to be

more confident and create new opportunities to excel as a leader. Be purposeful about what you want and know what kind of support you require. A leader will initiate action, start a conversation and is not afraid to ask for help. Be willing to start small. Don't wait to be invited.

When it comes to ensuring there are more women leaders like yourselves advocating for the rights of adolescent girls and young women in the HIV response, what would be your message for organizations, actors and funders, such as UN Women, UNAIDS, PEPFAR, the Global Fund and others?

My message is that it's important to create more meaningful ways to engage adolescent girls and young women in all our diversity. There is too little engagement with young women leaders, especially those from local communities with limited experience in advocacy and public speaking. More needs to be done to provide these women and girls with access to training, tools and resources to amplify their leadership and voice in the HIV response. Placement-based learning provides excellent opportunities for young women to develop their leadership skills and confidence. Bringing these women into spaces of influence is another critical strategy, so they can advocate for their rights and priorities directly with decision makers, funders and politicians.

CASE STUDY 2: WE INSPIRE TOGETHER

MENTORING YOUNG WOMEN LEADERS TO PUSH FOR
IMPROVED HIV SERVICES AND POLICY CHANGE



THE ISSUE

Adolescent girls and young women affected by HIV are a vast, diverse group of individuals. While there is increasing prioritisation in the global HIV response, especially in eastern and southern Africa, adolescent girls and young women are still frequently viewed as 'targets' and 'beneficiaries' – with too few platforms available to articulate their priorities or actively shape the programmes and policies affecting their lives, health and well-being.¹

Mentoring has increasingly become recognized as a method to support the growth, development and leadership of adolescent girls and young women,² as well as a key element of HIV prevention and youth programming.³

However, access and availability to mentorship programmes can be unequal. Women and girls living in areas of poor digital connectivity are likely to have less access to formal mentoring, as are young women on lower incomes where affordability of internet data is a barrier. There are specific obstacles that limit the participation of adolescent girls below the age of 18, and established civil society or community leaders may take precedence over less experienced women leaders for selection of mentorship opportunities because they are better known.

Experienced and skilled advocates have many demands on their time, resulting in a heavy workload. This highlights the urgent need to mentor and support more adolescent girls and young women to engage in advocacy and develop their skills and experience, to ensure that [they] are heard effectively in every space and at every decision-making table that affects them, without overloading and risking burnout for the experienced few.

#WhatWomenWant: HIV prevention that works for adolescent girls and young women.
ATHENA Initiative

THE APPROACH

The UN Women-PEPFAR programme addressed some of these challenges by increasing access to mentorship opportunities for young women from diverse backgrounds, cultures and contexts across sub-Saharan Africa. Linking them up with women in positions of authority as mentors, the programme aimed to create enabling environments for young women to realise their rights, protect themselves, access services and live free of violence and discrimination.

Through its convening role, UN Women brought together prominent women leaders in government, parliament, civil society organizations, women's rights groups and the media, with emerging young women leaders from feminist, HIV and youth movements across Africa. Nominations for mentees were received from PEPFAR's DREAMs initiative,⁴ the HER Voice Fund implemented by the Global Network of Young People

Living with HIV (Y+ Global), the African Women Leaders Network (AWLN) Youth Caucus and UN Women's existing feminist and youth-led networks.

Based on feminist principles, the UN Women mentorship programme linked adolescent girls and young women with women leaders to foster intercultural and intergenerational dialogue. It aimed to engage mentors and mentees in identifying pathways to address structural gender inequalities that hinder young women's access to HIV and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services – and to provide role models to inspire the mentees on their own leadership journeys.

Mentoring guides developed by Gender at Work were tailored to the needs of mentees, recognising the diversity of adolescent girls and young women in sub-Saharan Africa.⁵ Sessions were organized to

familiarise mentors and mentees with the mentorship's objectives and goals, feminist principles and learning approaches. Emphasis was placed on a non-hierarchical mentorship model, whereby the mentee is not viewed as a learner, or the mentor as a teacher. Instead, young women mentees are seen as bringing their own knowledge, lived experience and insights to the process while simultaneously recognising the established women leaders' knowledge and expertise as vital to the mentee's growth.⁶

In addition to traditional one-to-one mentoring, UN Women created a system incorporating both individual and group mentoring sessions as a more feminist approach to mentorship so that peer solidarity, cross-learning and peer mentoring could also occur.⁷ Digital communication tools, such as WhatsApp and Zoom, facilitated this process.

Over several months, adolescent girls and young women met regularly with established women leaders to openly discuss the issues that affect them. Topics

included access to health services, sexual and reproductive health and rights, comprehensive sexuality education, tackling harmful gender norms and practices, gender-based violence, HIV-related stigma and discrimination, feminist leadership and promoting the rights of adolescent girls and young women in the HIV response. Mentoring sessions were mostly online but some mentees and mentors benefitted from face-to-face meetings.

"Mentorship opportunities for adolescent girls and young women can be limited, and this affects their capacity to know and claim their rights. Building and sustaining a women's movement requires coming together to share our experiences. In my community, we believe that it is the role of every woman to teach and mentor the younger ladies on the dangers of HIV, how best they can protect themselves and, more importantly, how they can start to lead the youth movement to speak out and stand up for their rights."

Ms. Ida Deleza,
Senior Chief Chikumbu of Mulanje District, Malawi

THE RESULTS

Between November 2022 and February 2023, 144 young women leaders aged 18-24 from 15 countries accessed mentorship opportunities with 63 women leader mentors. Through this initiative, mentees and mentors became collaborative change agents, working together to improve the environment for young women to access HIV services, speak up and claim their rights.

"One-to-one mentorship has helped me to exert more agency in my life and engage in advocacy and decision making spaces while staying authentic and clear about my advocacy priorities. This relationship has enlightened me on how the older and younger generations can best work together for the realisation of our common cause - women's rights! Going forward, it is my wish to see more mentoring initiatives at the grassroots in order to have empowered young women leaders at all levels of our society and within the HIV response."

Prudence Chavula, mentee, feminist, girl child education activist and SRHR advocate, Malawi

Endline surveys with mentees and mentors reported that the initiative succeeded in increasing mentees' confidence in exercising their leadership in different settings. The majority of adolescent girls and young women who responded to the survey expressed acquiring a "great deal" and "a lot of confidence" at the personal (79%), community (82%) and organizational (77%) levels.

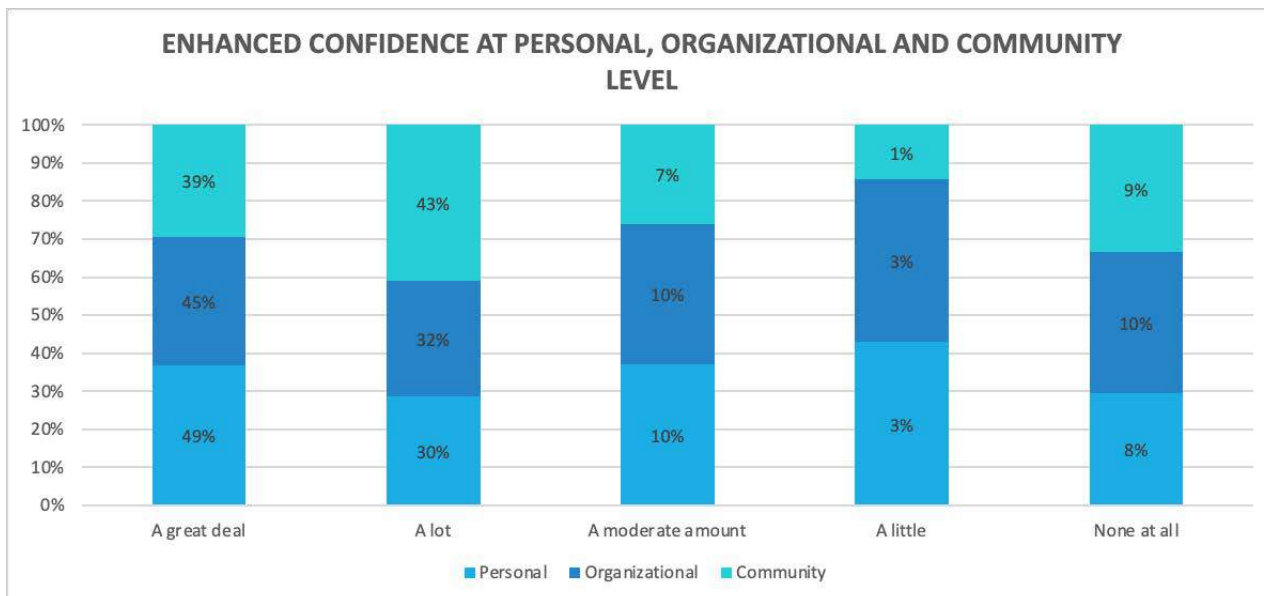
For mentees, benefits cited included a boost in self-confidence, communication skills, development, advocacy and storytelling training and opportunities to expand personal and professional networks. Mentors also gained new insights and perspectives. Several highlighted how insights shared by their mentees have changed their understanding of the needs and priorities of today's adolescent girls and young women and how these perspectives will inform their work going forward as women leaders.

"After meeting my mentor, Ms. Florida Batumuliza, she shared her experiences with me and said, 'Anything positive you want to do to change Rwandan society, do it now, because you don't know if opportunities that you see now will be there tomorrow'."

Her advice helped me overcome my fears and I decided to start a radio talk show called "Jye n'ubuzima bwajye." I have already started to receive positive feedback from the audience. I would recommend more formal sessions that are face-to-face (providing some financial support to facilitate this) and additional support so that mentees can become mentors to other young women."

Aisha Uwase, DREAMS Ambassador and YWCA staff member, Rwanda

Findings from the endline survey with mentees, conducted in March 2023



"My mentor has inspired me and helped me to develop resilience and be courageous in my advocacy on behalf of other adolescent girls and young women. She imparted skills and knowledge, not just about HIV but about other issues as well, and she helped me to identify solutions when I encountered problems. My mentor was so open and dedicated, which made our sessions a success as they were very interactive. Mentoring took place online because transport was a barrier to conducting our sessions in person. Delays in receiving data bundles to support our online conversations also postponed some sessions. I would recommend more face-to-face mentorship opportunities and ensuring data bundles are provided well in advance."

Tiwonge Chunga, mentee, District DREAMS Ambassador, Jhpiego, Malawi

Feminist mentorship successfully built adolescent girls' and young women's confidence to directly engage with leaders and decision makers within community, national and international settings. This was evidenced by the active role of mentees in events that took place over the period of the mentorship programme.

These included national HIV planning processes, regional and global convenings for the Global Fund Seventh Replenishment, the 24th International AIDS Conference and the High-Level Meeting on Championing the Priorities of Women and Girls in the HIV Response. Mentees of the programme – including Hadale Saru from Kenya, Grace Ngulube from Malawi, Ndiilo Nthengwe from Namibia and Ruth Awori from Uganda – spoke publicly in front of service providers, legislators, politicians, funders and even presidents, to

demand better access to HIV services for adolescent girls and young women.

"I am doing what I am doing because of the mentorship I received. It's not enough to put someone in a space. It's been because of support and the continuous engagement in different spaces, and the capacity strengthening, that I am able to do what I'm doing today. I call upon all programmers, all funders: please take interest in empowering young women, building their capacities and offering continuous mentorship."

Ruth Awori, Executive Director of the Uganda Network of Young People living with HIV/AIDS and participant in UN Women's mentoring initiative speaking at the 24th International AIDS Conference, 2022

LESSONS LEARNED

The possibilities of feminist mentoring hold particular resonance for adolescent girls and young women in sub-Saharan Africa, given the well-documented barriers they face in accessing HIV and SRH services and the disproportionate burden of HIV they bear.

This type of mentorship is designed to be a long-term, transformative process that builds reciprocal relationships of solidarity, mutual learning and support. UN Women's mentorship programme acknowledges that learning is a continuous journey that involves building trust, sustaining connectedness and facilitating inter-generational conversations and unlearning. Feminist mentorship builds feminist leadership and enables mentees to journey at their pace and navigate difficult spaces.⁸

UN Women's mentorship programme initiative has shown that emerging and established women leaders are indispensable role models who can powerfully communicate and inspire within their own communities. They can also inspire other social and gender justice movements – for all generations.

These findings are reinforced by impacts seen from other studies in sub-Saharan Africa that have emphasised transformative communications and learning and collective action through networking and mentorship, as critical components of a holistic approach to preventing HIV among adolescent girls and young women.⁹

FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

The supportive relationships formed between mentors and mentees during this initiative were immediate and sustained. In many instances, these relationships have extended beyond the initial mentorship period, continuing into 2023 and beyond.

Mentees have also gone on to become mentors, reinforcing that adolescent girls and young women who can confidently and meaningfully discuss HIV on their own terms are best placed to support their peers. This could be asking questions about sex and reproduction, accessing HIV testing, learning about and accessing available prevention methods, linking to care or

treatment and, critically, staying in care and treatment programmes once initiated.¹⁰

The UN Women mentorship programme shows the short- and medium-term benefits of feminist mentoring to adolescent girls and young women in sub-Saharan Africa. In the global health field, it is increasingly recognised that there are long-term returns on investment in human connection.¹¹ Going forward, opportunities to connect emerging and established women leaders through feminist mentoring should be viewed as an important strategy for the region's HIV response.

"I had the opportunity to gain practical knowledge and insight from my mentor, Hon. Rose Mukantabana, who has achieved a level of expertise in the same field of work that I aspire to. The mentoring relationship encouraged me to start my own organization to empower other young women and adolescent girls in the community, especially in my village. As I go about this work, I face challenges such as deference to social norms and a lack of resources. But we are still pushing for change. I would like to see the leadership and mentorship opportunities that I received through the UN Women programme extended to more young women and girls in village areas because they need these information and skills."

Shyaka Umwali Brenda, mentee, co-founder of Mbera Umugisha Organization, Rwanda

HERSTORY IN THE MAKING:

MEET THE LEADERS CHAMPIONING CHANGE FOR WOMEN'S HEALTH AND RIGHTS

Faith Hope Thipe

Faith is an activist and change maker from Botswana, a DREAMS Mentor and a Youth Advisor at the Global Network of Young People Living with HIV (Y +Global). In 2022, she participated in the UN Women-PEPFAR programme to strengthen the leadership and voice of young women in the HIV response.

What motivated you to step up and become a leader in your community?

I was motivated by my personal experiences and observations of the marginalization and inequalities faced by girls and young women particularly in rural areas. Growing up, I witnessed the challenges and barriers that girls faced in accessing education, health care and opportunities for personal and professional growth, and it is still the case even today. These experiences ignited a deep sense of empathy and a strong desire to act and create a positive change. Ultimately, it is my deep-rooted belief in the potential of every individual, regardless of their gender or background, that has motivated me to step up and become a leader. I am driven by the vision of a society where everyone has equal rights and opportunities, and I am committed to working towards that goal.

How have you built confidence as a young leader who advocates for the health and rights of adolescent girls and young women?

Building confidence has been a journey for me. It has been coupled with continuous learning, seeking mentorship, building a supportive network, embracing failures, celebrating achievements and stepping outside my comfort zone. It is an ongoing process that requires a lot of self-reflection, determination and a commitment to personal and professional growth.

Why do you feel having a mentor matters for young women who want to become leaders?

I have been fortunate to have the guidance and support of amazing mentors. Having a mentor is invaluable for young women aspiring to become leaders because it brings wisdom and experience



Photo credit: Faith Hope Thipe

to the table as they have already navigated the challenges and hurdles that younger women may encounter. Moreover, they provide networking opportunities and emotional support, as the advocacy and development space can get very overwhelming. They also serve as role models, instil confidence and empower young women to overcome barriers and achieve their leadership goals.

What were some of the benefits you received from your leadership experience in the UN Women-PEPFAR programme? Did you experience any challenges?

My involvement in the programme has provided me with invaluable leadership experiences. These experiences have enhanced my skills, expanded my network, provided platforms for advocacy and fostered personal growth and empowerment. While challenges have arisen, like having limited time with my mentor, I remain resilient and proactive in finding alternative ways to maximize the benefits of mentorship and make the most of my leadership journey.

What advice would you give to the new generation of female leaders who want to speak up and claim their rights in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights and HIV?

Be bold and fearless in your pursuit. Educate yourself about the issues, understand the complexities, and stay updated on the latest developments. Seek mentorship and guidance from experienced advocates who can support and empower you. Embrace your unique voice and use it to challenge the status quo, raise awareness and advocate for comprehensive SRHR and HIV policies. Lasty, ALWAYS remember that change takes time, perseverance and resilience, but your determination can pave the way for a more equitable and inclusive future.

When it comes to ensuring there are more women leaders advocating for the rights of adolescent girls and young women in the HIV response, what would be your message for organizations, actors and funders, such as UN Women, PEPFAR, UNAIDS, the Global Fund and others?

It is crucial to ensure that more women leaders advocating for the rights of adolescent girls and young women in the HIV response have meaningful representation and participation. It is not enough to simply include us to meet diversity quotas; we need to be given seats at the table throughout the entire process, from brainstorming to evaluation. Our perspectives, experiences and voices are essential for developing effective strategies, programmes and policies that address the unique needs of this marginalized population. By actively involving us, you can foster inclusive decision making, promote gender equality and ultimately achieve more impactful outcomes in the fight against HIV and the advancement of the rights of adolescent girls and young women.

CASE STUDY 3: GENERATION NOW

CREATING SAFE SPACES FOR ADOLESCENT GIRLS AND
YOUNG WOMEN TO LIFT THE TABOO ON SEXUALITY,
POWER AND HIV PREVENTION



THE ISSUE

In sub-Saharan Africa, high HIV incidence rates in adolescent girls and young women persist despite extensive HIV prevention efforts. Approximately 4,900 adolescent girls and young women became infected with HIV every week in 2021,¹ with almost six times as many adolescent girls newly infected with HIV than adolescent boys.²

Unfortunately, many of the challenges that were prominent over a decade ago in the HIV response remain urgent issues for women in sub-Saharan Africa today. These include gender-based violence, cultural norms that constrain women's and girls' bodily autonomy, lack of access to critical information and health services for HIV/sexually transmitted infection (STI), child marriage, women's unequal share of unpaid care work and young women's limited access to formal education and skills development.

Peer-to-peer support and intergenerational solidarity has the potential to help younger generations of women and girls to advocate for their needs and rights at the community and national levels.

Across the region, intergenerational dialogue is an important way for women of all ages to share their views and experiences of access to HIV information and services. Where younger women can learn from the progress of generations before them, older generations of women can learn from the difficulties adolescent girls and young women are facing in accessing the services they need to stay healthy. Together, they can try to find solutions to overcome the challenges they collectively face.

“Adolescent girls and young women are taking the lead in breaking barriers, challenging norms and practices in tackling the existing inequalities. We are all eager to change the narratives, because we are the GENERATION EQUALITY – accessing spaces we deserve for the generations we have and for the generations to come.”

Rahma Seleman Jumanne, youth advocate, Tanzania

THE APPROACH

Since its establishment in 2011, UN Women's partnership with civil society has been strategic, innovative and aimed at strengthening political solidarity and building feminist movements.

The methodology of the intergenerational dialogue supports these feminist aims. The approach is unique in the way it empowers individuals and communities to share issues of importance within their lives and develop a common set of actions to address areas of concern.

In 2022, the UN Women-PEPFAR programme launched a series of intergenerational dialogues on improved access to HIV services for women and girls with two principal objectives. Objective one focused on dialogue between feminist and youth-led HIV movements,

bringing adolescent girls and young women together with established leaders to promote women's rights.

Objective two built on existing lessons from the HIV response, which show that changing social dynamics and norms can build an enabling environment for women to realise their full human rights.³ This draws on approaches across Africa and beyond that use various forms of dialogue as an entry point to challenge gender norms on adolescent and young women's sexual and reproductive health given the influence of parents, caregivers and the community over youth decision-making.⁴

A radical shift is needed in our collective responses to young people and to the arrangements that either exclude or support them. To achieve intergenerational solidarity requires us to think more deeply about our commitments to dignity and collective freedom, in solidarity within feminist movements. We need practical changes that shift patterns of exclusion to new patterns of engagement.

UN Women Statement on International Youth Day. 12 August 2022.

At community and national levels, the programme facilitated intergenerational dialogues through digital, face-to-face and hybrid events across several countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Online dialogues brought together different generations of leaders and activists from feminist movements and the HIV social movement. These included women living with HIV, adolescent girls, women with disabilities, as well as young and older feminist activists.

Other face-to-face or hybrid events invited men and women from diverse backgrounds, including traditional and faith-based leaders, community gatekeepers and family groups. Across these different formats, the focus remained the same: to collectively improve access to non-discriminatory HIV services for women and girls and support the realisation of their rights.

“By bringing together established and emerging women leaders across Africa, and with the support of partners, this intergenerational collective of African women leaders will ensure that the voices of women of all ages inform decision-making around the HIV response. This is key to ensuring that the HIV response going forward meets the needs of everyone including young women.”

Sima Bahous, Executive Director of UN Women, 11 October 2022.

THE RESULTS

In 2022, the programme supported almost 200 adolescent girls and young women to highlight their needs and priorities through the intergenerational dialogue process. For many, the dialogues created space for knowledge and skills transfer, mentoring and building bridges for joint advocacy. There was an emphasis on nurturing mutual respect that ensured younger women were not lectured and older leaders were not dismissed. Rather, conversations were able to develop organically in a way that supported intergenerational transfer of knowledge and leadership.

“I understand that as young women who are going through this journey of leadership, we’re also in search for skills, tools and the confidence to effectively engage with decision makers on issues [related] to the HIV response, so I hope the experiences that I share...informed by working in community-based HIV programmes for adolescent girls and young women...will help us connect the dots in different areas, whether it’s in relation to service delivery or financing.”

Ambele Judith Mwamelo, public health specialist, Tanzania speaking during one of the intergenerational dialogues supported through the programme

Issues brought to the attention of decision makers, community leaders, prominent gender equality advocates and national politicians included: lack of access to youth-friendly HIV and SRH information and services, taboos about sexuality, stigma and discrimination, gender-based violence, child marriage, unpaid care work responsibilities and young women’s access to educational and economic opportunities. Actions

to address these issues were discussed, negotiated and in several cases agreed to and adopted by the participants.

On 11 October 2022, the International Day of the Girl Child, UN Women and the Government of the United Republic of Tanzania co-hosted a High-Level Meeting that brought together an intergenerational collective of 24 young women leaders (including ten PEPFAR DREAMS Ambassadors, five HER Voice Fund Ambassadors and nine advocates supported by the African Women Leaders Network and UN Women) with 30 women leaders. The latter included women Ministers and leaders in health, education and gender equality. A further 161 adolescent girls and young women participated virtually. At this cross-generational, cross-sectoral, cross-country leadership meeting, the Executive Director of UN Women launched a new intergenerational collective of African women leaders to ensure the voices of women of all ages inform decision-making around the HIV response across sub-Saharan Africa. Today, the collective continues to promote gender equality and the empowerment of young women and girls throughout the region.

“I am proud to launch today a collective of women leaders – both established and emerging – working hand in hand, rallying for better lives for young women and adolescent girls.”

Sima Bahous, UN Women Executive Director, High-Level Meeting in Tanzania, 11 October 2022

This landmark event, and other intergenerational dialogues supported through the UN Women-PEPFAR programme, helped bring hundreds of adolescent girls' and young women's voices to the fore of community- and national-level discussions on HIV.

"Transferring knowledge from the older generation to the younger generation is not happening at a large enough scale within the HIV response. We need to come together to share our experiences and discuss culturally appropriate strategies and consequences of personal choices that can help reduce

young women's vulnerability to HIV. For example, within my community, we have mothers' groups that work closely with Girls' Clubs for adolescent girls both in and out of school. This type of platform, and intergenerational dialogue, allows the older generation to assist younger women while also learning from the new generation about the context in which they are living."

Ms. Ida Deleza, Senior Chief Chikumbu of Mulanje District, Malawi

“

The opportunity to participate in the High-Level Meeting on Championing the Priorities of Women and Girls in the HIV Response [meant I was] able to interact with women leaders who have walked the journey [and this] has empowered me to know who can support and hold my hand as I amplify adolescent girls' and young women's priorities and leadership in the HIV response through identifying promising strategies and approaches to protect ourselves from HIV and seek non-discriminatory services.

Millicent Setaile, Youth Officer at SRHR Africa Trust, HER Voice Fund Ambassador, Botswana.

Photo credit: UN Women/Rashid Hamis Kindamba



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LESSONS LEARNED

The UN Women-PEPFAR programme demonstrates how intergenerational dialogues engage generations of both men and women in critical conversations about gender norms, taboos on sexuality, unmet SRH needs and access barriers faced by young women and adolescent girls. They can be equally effective as a physical, virtual or hybrid discussion, conducted in a community-based setting or at a high-level inter-governmental meeting. Wherever they take place, intergenerational conversations can change minds, break down stereotypes and empower young women leaders.

Engaging adolescent girls and young women through intergenerational dialogue has shown the importance of reflecting their interests and concerns when seeking to remove access barriers to HIV and SRH services for young people. Decision makers, politicians and service providers need perspectives and insights from their lived experiences. Only by working with young women can we ensure that HIV policies, budgets and services look beyond short-term, immediate needs and to the needs of adolescent girls and coming generations. To achieve this, more must be done to create spaces for direct engagement, open dialogue, trust and intergenerational solidarity.

FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

Replication of the intergenerational dialogue process across sub-Saharan Africa would create more opportunities for younger generations of women to have a say in decisions that affect them.

The successful experience of the intergenerational collective of African women leaders established in Tanzania opens the door for similar partnerships that can advocate for policies and practices that improve access to services for adolescent girls and young women across the region.

Since the launch of the collective in October 2022, further intergenerational dialogues have taken place with a deliberate effort taken to include and amplify the voices of young women, including many who participated in the UN Women-PEPFAR programme. Examples include the



Source: [Twitter](#)

4th African Women Leaders Network Intergenerational Retreat for Economic Empowerment, Sustainability and Financial Inclusion, held between 2-4 December 2022 in Zanzibar, Tanzania.

HERSTORY IN THE MAKING:

MEET THE LEADERS CHAMPIONING CHANGE FOR WOMEN'S HEALTH AND RIGHTS

Tanyaradzwa Makotore

Tanyaradzwa is a sexual and reproductive health and rights advocate in Zimbabwe and a PEPFAR DREAMS Ambassador. In 2022, she participated in the UN Women-PEPFAR programme to strengthen the leadership and voice of young women in the HIV response.

What motivated you to step up and become a leader in your community as a DREAMS Ambassador?

In high school, I received training to provide peer support to other students and facilitate sessions on sensitive topics including sexually transmitted infections (STIs), religious and cultural norms and women's health and rights. Through this experience, that I was introduced to SRHR advocacy and became motivated to learn more about ending HIV and gender-based violence.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic hit. There was a rise in cases of domestic violence, teenage pregnancies and acceleration in the transmission of STIs. This is when I decided to act. During the lockdowns, I organized online sessions via WhatsApp, which is an affordable and accessible platform for most young people in Zimbabwe. These aimed to empower adolescent girls and young women to make informed decisions about their bodies and health. Through this work, I was selected to receive training to become a DREAMS Ambassador. Since then, I haven't looked back and through the DREAMS Initiative I've had more opportunities to assume a leadership role within my community.

How have you built confidence as a young leader who advocates for the health and rights of adolescent girls and young women?

Volunteerism shaped me into becoming the leader I am today, exposing me to different environments and groups of people. Through volunteering I got to work with community health organizations in local villages around my home. I became more confident approaching young women and having conversations with them on ending HIV and GBV. My volunteering experience

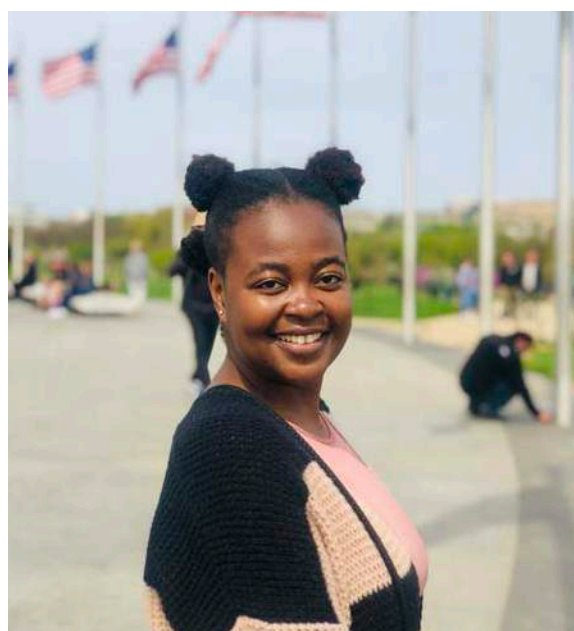


Photo credit: Tanyaradzwa Makotore

developed my leadership skills and this led to me being selected for the DREAMS Ambassador programme. I have continued with my volunteering work, particularly SRHR advocacy on social media. This has given me more confidence to assume a leadership role in the HIV response, both in Zimbabwe and in international forums.

Why do you feel having a mentor matters for young women who want to become leaders?

My first experience with mentorship was in 2020 with the Zimbabwe Health Interventions Gweru District Project Coordinator. We would have conversations on potential paths that I could follow and how to ensure I could make a positive impact through my work, especially on social media. My second mentorship was through the UN Women-PEPFAR programme, which was a more structured process. Both experiences have convinced me of the importance of mentorship.

Having a mentor has helped my communication skills, enabling me to voice my opinions to people older than me. Mentorship provided me with guidance on personal growth and improvement, building my confidence. The world is an evolving place where we continuously need to learn and

relearn, and I believe mentorship provides that opportunity for both mentor and mentee.

What were some of the benefits of participating in the UN Women-PEPFAR programme? Did you experience any challenges?

The most exciting benefit was attending the High-Level Meeting on Championing the Priorities of Women and Girls in the HIV Response in Tanzania and being included in a panel of emerging and established women leaders. As part of this intergenerational dialogue, I advocated for the rights of adolescent girls and young women in rural areas across sub-Saharan Africa.

I spoke about how women and girls in rural communities are impacted by lack of electricity, infrastructure and information, and why girls' education in school is a pathway to ensure their health and well-being. I loved getting to know other young women leaders in the region and made connections that I still benefit from today.

The leadership training helped me to understand the importance of self-care. This resonated because I often put pressure on myself to be better and do better. Since these sessions, I feel more excited about the future and what it holds, and my advocacy work has improved.

Some online sessions were difficult to attend because of the school exam season. I was grateful that the sessions were recorded so I could catch-up on the discussions. Also, I would have loved to meet my mentor in person and to interact with her face-to-face rather than virtually.

What advice would you give to the new generation of female leaders who want to speak up and claim their rights in the field of sexual reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and HIV?

You should never underestimate the power of social media. Social media platforms have the potential to support the leadership journeys of women and girls. You can use this platform to educate yourself. You can follow developments online in the field of SRHR and HIV and read about these issues. When you engage with social media you can create a positive digital footprint, shaping your online reputation and showing the world what you can achieve as a leader within your community.

When it comes to ensuring there are more women leaders advocating for the rights of adolescent girls and young women in the HIV response, what is your message for organizations, actors and funders such as UN Women, UNAIDS, PEPFAR, The Global Fund and others?

Continuous support to aspiring women leaders is needed and should take many forms. As young women, we have a lot of ideas we can implement to bring about positive change in our communities. Support is not just about financing; it extends to areas such as mentorship programmes, where guidance can be offered so that we can excel as women leaders. Ensuring the presence of young women in spaces of influence where decisions are made is vital. Give us the opportunities to showcase who we are, what we have learnt, and what we can do.



Photo credit: Tanyaradzwa Makotore (far left) participating in a panel discussion as part of an intergenerational dialogue at a High-Level Meeting in Tanzania, 11 October 2022. Photo credit: UN Women/Rashid Hamis Kindamba

CASE STUDY 4: WE ACHIEVE MORE WHEN WE STAND TOGETHER

BUILDING STRONGER FEMINIST MOVEMENTS IN
SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT
AND HEALTH



THE ISSUE

Women's leadership in the HIV response has challenged and changed the shape of the global architecture around HIV and AIDS, by exposing the links between HIV, sexual and reproductive health and rights and gender-based violence.¹ At the heart of these efforts has been women's civil society organizations.

For decades, women's organizations among those living with and affected by HIV revealed that HIV risk is greatly exacerbated by inequality. This is further underpinned by discriminatory social norms and institutions, which include rigid, traditional gender roles and taboos around sexuality.² Recently, the gendered fault lines in the health sector were glaringly exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic.³

In 2020, COVID-19 threatened to derail the global HIV response – rolling back hard-fought gains of feminist and HIV movements⁴ and setting women's rights back decades.⁵ In sub-Saharan Africa, the pandemic has aggravated the risk of adolescent girls and young women to HIV infection because of a multitude of factors including child marriage, teenage pregnancy, dropping out of school, an increase in sexual and gender-based violence and reduced access to preventive and treatment services for HIV and STIs.⁶ This has propelled a new urgency to build feminist cross-movement collaboration and action across the region.

Today, more civil society organizations, and specifically women-led organizations, are calling for meaningful spaces and pathways for young women leaders to set

the agenda – not simply fill a seat on a panel or task force.

“Young women's leadership is key to ending AIDS as a public health threat by 2030. Adolescent girls and young women must meaningfully participate at all levels of decision making - in policy formulation, programme development and budget allocations. It is not just about being invited to meetings. It requires investment in women- and youth-led organizations and movements so that we can mobilise, engage in the HIV response and claim our rights. Young women should never settle for less!”

Lillian Mworeko Kyomuhangi, International Community of Women Living with HIV Eastern Africa (ICW-EA)

For feminist civil society, leadership also implies movement-building across related but often siloed fields of advocacy.⁷ These fields include HIV and GBV, bodily autonomy and SRHRsocial and economic justice. While women's movements have transformed policy in other sectors, HIV is consistently missing from global and regional feminist or gender equality strategies and agendas. This is despite proven links between gender inequality and HIV, and recognition of HIV as a potential cause and consequence of GBV.⁸

“Women and girls living with and affected by HIV have been at the forefront of feminist leadership for years. Let's acknowledge their work and follow their lead. Our future depends on it.”

Global Network of People Living with HIV (GNP+)



UN Women used its convening role to bring together feminist, youth-led and HIV social movements.
Photo credit: UN Women/Rashid Hamis Kindamba, 2022.

There is a need for movement-building within and between movements of women and girls, young people and key population networks, and for coordinated, nuanced advocacy and messages that speak to the intersectionality of issues and complexity of women's lives. Movement-building led by inclusive and diverse coalitions of women creates stronger responses.

#What Women Want: a transformative framework for women, girls and gender equality in the context of HIV and sexual and reproductive health and rights.
ATHENA. 2017.

THE APPROACH

UN Women has a long history of supporting women's organising across all areas of its work – including its work on women, HIV and AIDS.

Today, feminist movement building is a cornerstone of [Generation Equality](#), an initiative devised and convened by UN Women that brings together feminist organizations and movements, women's networks, governments, corporations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), youth-led groups and foundations to secure concrete transformative commitments for gender equality.

During the first year of Generation Equality implementation, UN Women made full use of its unique convening role to bring together emerging and established women leaders across feminist and HIV movements in sub-Saharan Africa, where adolescent girls and young women experience some of the highest rates of HIV risk and infection globally.⁹

The UN Women-PEPFAR programme engaged young women leaders from PEPFAR's Determined, Resilient, Empowered, AIDS-free, Mentored, and Safe (DREAMS) public-private partnership; the HER Voice Fund Ambassadors supported by the Global Network of Young People Living with HIV (Y+ Global); and young women leaders from the African Women Leaders Network (AWLN). This marked the first time these different organizations came together as parallel social and gender justice movements, with the specific aim of elevating the voices of adolescent girls and young women in sub-Saharan Africa to demand improved access to non-discriminatory HIV services.

Examples of movement building supported in 2022 include cross-sectoral mentorship, the creation of joint advocacy platforms, building strategic alliances and joint social media campaigns.

The Generation Equality campaign demands equal pay, equal sharing of unpaid care and domestic work, an end to sexual harassment and all forms of violence against women and girls, health-care services that respond to their needs and their equal participation in political life and decision-making in all areas of life. Key themes of Generation Equality are central to the HIV response – particularly GBV, SRHR, economic justice and feminist leadership and movements led by women and girls.

THE RESULTS

Cross-sectoral mentorship

UN Women's mentorship programme linked young women with women leaders from different feminist, social justice and HIV movements to foster intergenerational dialogue. The initiative aimed to engage mentors and mentees in identifying pathways to address structural gender inequalities that hinder young women's access to HIV and SRHR services and to provide role models to inspire the mentees on their own leadership journeys.

Based on feminist principles, cross-sectoral mentorship built adolescent girls' and young women's confidence to directly engage with all types of leaders and decision makers. In 2022, mentees of UN Women's mentorship

mentorship programme – including Hadale Saru from Kenya, Grace Ngulube from Malawi, Ndiilo Nthengwe from Namibia, and Ruth Awori from Uganda – spoke publicly in front of service providers, legislators, politicians, funders and even presidents to demand better access to HIV services for adolescent girls and young women.

Creation of joint advocacy platforms

An innovation of the UN Women-PEPFAR programme is connecting and mobilising young women's networks working on gender equality and HIV issues respectively around a common vision for change and a shared advocacy and policy agenda. Collaboration between DREAMS Ambassadors, the AWLN Youth Caucus, HER Voice Fund Ambassadors and UN Women-supported activists led to effective joint advocacy at key events, including the 24th International AIDS Conference (AIDS 2022), the Global Fund's Seventh Replenishment Conference and the High-Level Meeting in Tanzania on Championing the Priorities of Women and Girls in the HIV Response. These strengthened links led adolescent girls and young women to organize collectively and hold duty bearers accountable for delivering on their gender equality commitments in the HIV response.

Together, they developed a common message on issues of concern for adolescent girls and young women across sub-Saharan Africa – including stigma and discrimination, GBV, lack of SRHR, denial of their sexuality, child marriage and lack of access to education and livelihood opportunities. Joint advocacy proved effective in raising the visibility of their needs and priorities, resulting in public statements of support from decision makers,¹⁰

increased attention to women and girls as agents of change as part of international funding commitments¹¹ and mentions in media outlets.¹²



Source: [Twitter](#)

"I believe in being confident about what you stand for. Following participation in the AIDS 2022 Conference I continue to advocate with decision makers, including the county government, for quality HIV and sexual and reproductive health services to priority populations, including young women and adolescent girls, to achieve empowered, healthy and safe communities. My motto is: women can lead, decide, and thrive. Let's prevent HIV and not pass it on!"

Hadale Saru, DREAMS Ambassador at Hope Worldwide Kenya

Building strategic alliances

WhatsApp groups helped young women leaders to connect, share experiences and support one another to prepare for key engagements such as AIDS 2022, leadership training and the High-Level Meeting in Tanzania. Using WhatsApp as a digital tool for collaboration enabled young women from feminist, youth-led and HIV movements to strategize a common approach for elevating young women's voices in the HIV response. Discussions were led solely by young women and provision was made to overcome the gender digital divide by ensuring those with less access to reliable internet received data packages.

Joint social media campaigns

Collaboration between movements helped connect individuals and organizations with a larger audience, helping to expand networks, increase visibility for youth programming and amplify the voices of young women leaders in the HIV response. Supportive messages were developed as part of shared agendas, and NGOs, prominent women leaders and young women activists cross-posted content and shared links to amplify their collective impact on social media channels. Examples include the #TakeTheLead campaign that ran before, during and after the High-Level Meeting in Tanzania and the Global Fund's #FightForWhatCounts campaign to focus attention on women's rights and gender equality in sub-Saharan Africa.

LESSONS LEARNED

Social justice movements can generate deep and lasting changes that policy change and development interventions alone cannot achieve.¹³ Structural issues that impact the feminist and HIV movements are complex and deep rooted – confronting issues of inequality, power dynamics, violence, marginalization, and harmful social norms. Transforming these conditions requires multi-faceted, networked actions.

In bringing these movements together, the UN Women-PEPFAR programme reinforced the critical role of women's rights organizations in effective movement building that leads to positive, sustainable changes in gender norms, inequitable power relations and legislative shifts.¹⁴ Feminist movement-building strategies

offer lessons in fostering connections for greater movement participation and success. For example, grassroots participation that allows space to customise campaigns to local contexts; effective storytelling that engages the audience; and supporting spaces for national, regional and international sharing and exchange.

A key lesson from the programme is that though cross-movement groups may have different causes, they can still self-organize around shared goals and joint action. In doing so, the visibility and influence of young women in the HIV response is increased.

Women's civil society is the change agent at the core of movement-building, providing the 'backbone' to services, reaching into and partnering with communities, bringing lived experience to policymaking and advancing accountable governance.

#What Women Want: a transformative framework for women, girls and gender equality in the context of HIV and sexual and reproductive health and rights. ATHENA. 2017.

FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

In sub-Saharan Africa, now more than ever, stronger networking between the feminist and HIV movement is needed to protect and promote the rights of adolescent girls and young women. As countries in the region struggle with fiscal challenges, services vital for gender equality are among sectors suffering the biggest budget cuts, with implications for women's and girls' access to life-saving HIV services.¹⁵

"The current rates of HIV infections among young women demonstrates how closely Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality and SDG 3 on health and well-being are interlinked and how pressing it is to achieve both. I urge all stakeholders to deliver on the commitments made to Generation Equality, specifically those made to the Action Coalition on Bodily Autonomy and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, and to invest in feminist and youth-led HIV movements."

Sima Bahous, UN Women Executive Director,
1 December 2022

Through the UN Women-PEPFAR programme, women's networks, youth collectives and HIV organizations have come to recognise their shared purpose to build a stronger movement of young women leaders who can speak out and claim their rights. Across different fora, individuals and groups continue to network, dialogue and identify opportunities for movement-building. For example, between December 2022 and April 2023, these included engagement with the Global Fund Grant Cycle 7, the Education Plus initiative, the UNITED! Leadership Summit in South Africa and the 4th AWLN Intergenerational Retreat for Economic Empowerment, Sustainability and Financial Inclusion in Tanzania.

HERSTORY IN THE MAKING:

MEET THE LEADERS CHAMPIONING CHANGE FOR WOMEN'S HEALTH AND RIGHTS

Immaculate Amoit

Immaculate is a community health and gender expert and Founder/Director of the Western Twaweza Empowerment Campaign (WETEC), a community-based organization in western Kenya that provides safe spaces for adolescent girls to learn about their sexual and reproductive health and rights and to pursue entrepreneurship opportunities. In 2022, Immaculate participated in the UN Women-PEPFAR programme to strengthen the leadership and voice of young women in the HIV response.

What motivated you to step up and become a leader in your community?

Growing up, I didn't see women leaders in my own community. Seeing this gap and realising the lack of young women's involvement in SRHR, I took it upon myself to step up. I received encouragement from the late Leah Okeyo, an advocate on HIV issues and a community leader and change maker who educated girls and mentored young women to be leaders.

In 2014, I founded WETEC to create safe spaces for adolescent girls and strengthen their ability to exercise their agency and claim their rights to bodily autonomy. A friend then linked me to the African Women Leaders Network (AWLN) Youth Caucus, a platform that strengthened my resolve towards becoming a feminist leader.

How have you built confidence as a leader who advocates for the health and rights of adolescent girls and other young women?

Through reading, receiving advocacy training on SRHR and my work with WETEC. I have also received encouragement and validation from feminist change makers I've met in various forums across Africa and online platforms like World Pulse. Recently, my confidence has grown tremendously as a result of the hybrid mentorship and training I've received through the UN Women-PEPFAR programme. This mentorship initiative has given me a new set of skills, created opportunities to interact with senior policymakers and developed my confidence to speak up at high-profile national and international events.



Photo credit: Immaculate Amoit/WETEC

Why do you feel having a mentor matters for young women who want to become leaders?

Mentorship doesn't just offer career benefits to young women who want to become leaders; it also matters for girls in schools and tertiary-level institutions, as mentors are often seen as the blueprint. The mentors in my life have shared their most vulnerable leadership experiences with me, thus humanising leadership, feminism and activism. Mentoring relationships require mutual respect and confidentiality to function. As my current mentor often says, it gets lonelier at the top, so women need a network of support as they navigate their careers and daily life. Mentoring becomes an outlet for both the mentor and mentee. Leah Okeyo was my first mentor and inspiration. My mentorship journey was unique and personal; it was a friendship that blossomed into personal and spiritual growth for me. Leah introduced me to the empowerment framework, which was an entirely new concept; she taught me vision boarding and the principles of manifestation. Every one of us needs a mentor, as they increase our self-worth, competence and acceptance, especially for young women with minimal exposure to opportunities and platforms.

What were some of the benefits of participating in the UN Women-PEPFAR programme? Did you experience any challenges?

Being part of this initiative has increased my skills and confidence in all aspects of the work I do. From the leadership training, I gained insight about the importance of self-care and looking after your mental health. As an activist and founder of a community-based organization, the work I do with WETEC can feel overwhelming. Listening to experiences shared by other young women, I realised their experiences weren't different from mine. Though the contexts in which we live and work may differ, our realities are similar. Learning that I am not alone in the struggle for advancing gender equity was a relief. I particularly enjoyed the group mentorship sessions, which started with meditation and songs that encouraged reflection and relaxation. I have been incorporating these techniques into my day-to-day work and life. Normalising the need to rest has been revolutionary for me.

After these sessions I created a more structured system to support my work in the office and this has allowed me to work on other personal projects. I reach out to young women and my mentor whenever I need to talk or feel overwhelmed; my sisters in the HIV response have my back!

Attending and speaking at the High-Level Meeting on Championing the Priorities of Women and Girls in the HIV Response in Tanzania provided further opportunities to enhance my leadership and influencing skills. Representing the AWLN Youth Caucus, I used my platform to highlight how access to information and decision-making around SRH and HIV is crucial for girls and young women and to advocate with policymakers and funders for greater investment to address harmful social norms that perpetuate gender inequality.

What advice would you give to the new generation of female leaders who want to speak up and claim their rights in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights and HIV?

Female bodies have been politicised and global gains on SRHR are now at risk of being reversed due to toxic masculinity and internalised misogyny which is affecting policy formulation and implementation in many areas, including SRHR and HIV. Policies are being enacted to take away women's freedom and autonomy on issues of sexual health and access to basic reproductive health services. The new generation of young women

leaders should be bold and unapologetic if gender equality is to be realised in the HIV response.

The next generation of female leaders should also capitalise on intergenerational mentorship that allows for different views and perspectives to be embraced. This can open up opportunities and spaces for both mentee and mentor to forge ahead and thrive together. Engaging male allies to advocate for gender equality is also important and working with them, alongside established women leaders, can help adolescent girls and young women to access decision-making spaces so that they can speak up and claim their rights.

When it comes to ensuring there are more women leaders advocating for the rights of adolescent girls and young women in the HIV response, what would be your message for organizations, actors and funders, such as UN Women, UNAIDS, PEPFAR, the Global Fund and others?

My message would be to build the capacity of adolescent girls and young women to lead and to invest in strengthening youth- and women-led organizations, particularly those at the grassroots level. Funders and organizations supporting the HIV response in Eastern and Southern Africa should resource youth-led and feminist movements that advocate for comprehensive community care and responsive health services to reduce inequalities, especially gender inequalities, which prevent women and girls from accessing the information and services they need to stay healthy and safe. Providing these movements, and their young women leaders, with access and opportunities to influence decision making processes at national, regional and international levels is also critical.

CASE STUDY 5: WHO HOLDS THE MICROPHONE?

INCREASING YOUNG WOMEN'S ACCESS TO POLICYMAKERS
AND DECISION-MAKING SPACES IN THE HIV RESPONSE



THE ISSUE

Across sub-Saharan Africa, countries have implemented several comprehensive best practice programmes focused on improving the agency, economic empowerment and access to HIV and sexual and reproductive health services for adolescent girls and young women. Programmes such as the DREAMS, SASA!, HER and She Conquers have reported positive outcomes,¹ and the vital contributions that adolescent girls and young women make to all stages of policies and programmes for HIV prevention – from needs assessment to design, implementation and evaluation – is widely recognised.²

Global surveys of women and girls living with and affected by HIV have shown repeatedly that active involvement in policymaking and providing leadership for

programming is among their top demands.³ It suggests participation is still often viewed by women and girls as tokenistic. For example, involving testimonials rather than opportunities to truly influence decision-making.⁴ In particular, girls and young women who are living with HIV or from underserved populations report being sidelined from decision making. This is despite international commitment, made at the Paris AIDS Summit in 1994, to the greater involvement of people living with HIV and AIDS (GIPA) principle.

Even where opportunities are provided, adolescent girls and young women, as well as the organizations that represent them, often lack the practical skills to articulate their issues in a clear, strong and collective voice.⁵

Many countries have increasingly involved women and young people in developing HIV policies, guidelines, or strategies, but it is not clear to what extent their perspectives are actually taken into account when decisions are made.

UNAIDS. We've Got the Power! Women, Adolescent Girls, and the HIV Response. Geneva, 2020.

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Multiple inequalities and societal and structural barriers are the greatest obstacles we face as adolescent girls and young women in all our diversity. These impede us from making strategic contributions to the HIV response at all levels. Punitive laws, unfriendly youth services and the impact of COVID-19 further exacerbates these challenges. It is high time adolescent girls and young women are recognised as mutual partners and engaged in decision-making related to our health and rights.

Maximina Jokonya, HER Voice Fund Coordinator at Y+ Global.
Photo credit: Maximina Jokonya



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THE APPROACH

In its normative role, UN Women promotes the implementation of international commitments that support strengthening girls' and young women's leadership skills and involvement in decision-making. These commitments include the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (1979); International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) (1994); Paris AIDS Summit Declaration/The GIPA Principle (1994); and Beijing Declaration/Platform for Action, Fourth World Conference on Women (1995).

Throughout sub-Saharan Africa, UN Women amplifies young women's voices by bringing women's networks, alliances and campaigns into spaces of influence to shape the decisions that affect their lives – connecting them to national gender equality campaigns, equality policies and the HIV response.

A keystone of UN Women's approach is that to be heard and make an impact, young women need to be at key fora and have the skills and support to make strategic and effective inputs. However, there are obstacles in achieving this aim. Firstly, ensuring that emerging

women leaders are invited to represent their peers or organizations at these events, and secondly that they have sufficient funds to attend. An additional challenge is making sure young women make an impact at these gatherings – having 'got a seat at the table,' they need to have the skills to know when and how to make inputs in the most beneficial way.

"Today we call for national coordinating bodies, for national dialogues and for community-led processes to strengthen the platforms they have by deepening their engagement with adolescent girls and young women's voices, and to see women and girls as integral, central partners in all our collective efforts on HIV and AIDS. We must transform norms, so women, including young women, are accepted as leaders and given access to more effective platforms. We must facilitate spaces, provide opportunities, and learn through intergenerational exchange, so that young women can lead more effectively."

Sima Bahous, UN Women Executive Director,
11 October 2022



Left to right: Nyasha Phanisa Sithole, DAWA, Zimbabwe; Mphuthi Thato, South Africa; Cynthia Wakuna, HER Voice Fund Ambassador, Cameroon; Ruth Awori, Uganda Network of Young People living with HIV/AIDS, Uganda; Lillian Mworeko, International Community of Women living with HIV Eastern Africa (ICW-EA), Uganda; Caroline Ngonze, UNAIDS Geneva at the 24th International AIDS Conference. Photo credit: UN Women

The UN Women-PEPFAR programme sought to address these obstacles by collaborating with HER Voice Fund, implemented by the Global Network of Young People Living with HIV (Y+ Global), PEPFAR's DREAMS initiative,⁶ and other women's rights and youth organizations. The shared aim was to increase young women leaders' access and contributions to national, regional and international meetings, where key issues that affect them are discussed and important decisions are made.

THE RESULTS

Increased opportunities for young women to actively participate and advocate for their needs and priorities at the AIDS 2022 Conference.

Seventy young women leaders across Africa were able to participate in conference sessions, with many leading discussions on what works when tackling gender barriers to HIV services. Those attending in person and virtually included young women from the PEPFAR DREAMS Partnership, Y+ Global, the African Women Leaders Network (AWLN) and UN Women-supported youth organizations.

Their powerful stories and advocacy on young women's needs were delivered to influential figures in the global HIV response, including delegates attending the UN Women and PEPFAR convened satellite session 'Stories of Leadership: Making an Impact for Women and Girls in the HIV Response.'

Young women's improved visibility and access to high-level decision makers at the Global Fund's Seventh Replenishment Conference.

With support from the UN Women-PEPFAR programme, young women leaders from sub-Saharan Africa were at the forefront of a strategic, targeted advocacy campaign for increased investments in adolescent girls and young women's programming. Throughout the replenishment process their voices were amplified digitally across social media and in person through the attendance of several HER Voice Fund Ambassadors at the replenishment launch and subsequent conference.

Young women leaders across the region, such as Grace Ngulube from Malawi, seized the opportunity to share their perspectives and have their voices heard by funders, philanthropists, private-sector partners and politicians – including the Presidents of Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa, Senegal and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Key fora in 2022 included the 24th International AIDS Conference (AIDS 2022) in Montreal, Canada; the Global Fund's Replenishment Conference in New York, USA; and the regional High-Level Meeting on Championing the Priorities of Women and Girls in the HIV Response in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

Stronger connections forged between emerging and established women leaders to achieve joint action at the High-Level Meeting in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

Young women's leadership was a focus of the High-Level Meeting on Championing the Priorities of Women and Girls in the HIV Response. The event was co-hosted by the Government of the United Republic of Tanzania and UN Women in partnership with PEPFAR, UNAIDS, AWLN, Y+ Global, the International Community of Women Living with HIV in Eastern Africa and others. Twenty-four young women leaders from 15 countries attended in person, and a further 161 participated virtually. Through dialogues, round table discussions and women's individual testimonies, emerging and established leaders were brought together to jointly address the barriers faced by young women in voicing their concerns and assuming their leadership positions in the HIV response. Women decision makers, including Ministers of Health, Gender and Youth, and representatives of National AIDS Commissions, acknowledged this gap, committing to advance the priorities of adolescent girls and young women in their respective country's HIV response. The meeting culminated in a set of recommendations for policymakers and concluded with the Executive Director of UN Women launching an intergenerational collective of emerging and established women leaders to take forward these issues and advance gender equality across sub-Saharan Africa.

“

AIDS 2022 [conference] participation was an exceptional experience, learning and sharing with other young women about their role as leaders and what it means to represent and carry the voices of adolescent girls and young women in all our diversity. It was a time to be inspired, learn, unlearn and implement.

Cynthia Wakuna, HER Voice Fund Ambassador, Cameroon.
Photo credit: Y+ Global



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We hope that in this next Strategy cycle we can do more to ensure that all countries that receive money from the Global Fund are addressing gender inequality and upholding the rights of adolescent girls and young women. I call on the Global Fund partnership [...] to end cultural barriers to access to equitable health services, end gender-based violence [and] end stigma and discrimination.

Grace Ngulube, HER Voice Fund Ambassador for Malawi, speaking at the Launch of the Global Fund's Seventh Replenishment, 2022.
Photo credit: Y+ Global



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UN WOMEN'S TAKE THE LEAD SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGN


#TakeTheLead

To coincide with the High-Level Meeting in Tanzania, the UN Women-PEPFAR Programme launched a social media campaign with the hashtag #TakeTheLead so that young women leaders could amplify their voices, speak out on their rights and advocate with policymakers for positive change.

Millicent Sethaile
@Milly_Reo

This past week I had the opportunity to speak on the gaps we see in regards to ending HIV for young women. I will consistently talk on the need to fund programs that empower, protect and serve girls and young women. That's our first step to closing the gap. #takethelead

UN Women Africa @unwomenafrica · Oct 11, 2022
Young leaders are advocating for greater resources at the #TakeTheLead meeting.
@MillyReo
@PEPFAR
@UNAIDS
Show this thread



6:17 AM · Oct 14, 2022 from Tanzania

Source: [Twitter](#)

Nakato Martha Clara
@marclara180

An empowered girl or young woman is unstoppable. She is assertive & focused - she knows her worth & will make informed choices about her body & future. We are here to make more of such women. Join the movement. #TakeTheLead #WeLead @unwomenuganda @Yplus_Global

UN Women Africa @unwomenafrica · Oct 10, 2022
When young women & girls are empowered, they have the means to protect themselves from #HIV & to access HIV information & services #TakeTheLead
Show this thread



12:52 PM · Oct 10, 2022

Source: [Twitter](#)

agshongwe
@anneshongwe

Young girls from across Africa #takethelead with powerful voices, activism and proposals to champion their own priorities in the #HIV response well done @unwomen for this inter generational convo @UNAIDS_ESA @Nalafem



10:29 AM · Oct 11, 2022

Source: [Twitter](#)

Neema Meremo
@NeemaMeremo

Had a fantastic and productive day today with fellow young women leaders from 15 SubSaharan African Countries on Championing the Priorities of Women and Girls in the HIV Response. #TakeTheLead @unwomenafrica @unwomentanzania @PEPFAR @awln_YoungWomen @AWLNetwork @UNAIDSTanzania



UN Women Africa and 6 others

8:46 PM · Oct 10, 2022

Source: [Twitter](#)

LESSONS LEARNED

Investing in women's leadership and participation is central to achieving SDG 5 on gender equality, as well as SDG 3 on health, and the Global AIDS Strategy 2021-2026.

Ensuring that adolescent girls and young women participate as leaders in the HIV response requires a multi-pronged approach. While formal training and mentoring can offer a lot, it is not enough on its own. Providing young women affected by HIV with visibility and access to leadership opportunities is critical and should take place on a continuous rather than ad-hoc basis. Learnings from the UN Women-PEPFAR programme suggest that support to emerging women leaders can, and should, be done through many different approaches. Offering young women multiple complementary forms of support is likely to increase effectiveness.

For example, inviting women to take part in different fora must go hand in hand with investment in skill development and communication capabilities so that they can participate fully as adolescent girls and young women affected by HIV. To this end, we all have a shared responsibility to enable this type of female leadership – governments, funders and programme implementers alike.

"We should open doors and invest in building their [adolescent girls' and young women's] skills and confidence so that they can make positive changes in their communities and countries."

Hon. Dr. Dorothy Gwajima, Minister of Health,
Community Development, Gender, Elders and Children,
United Republic of Tanzania

"I just want to say to you young women that this is the time... you are going to be the ones that lead us as our collaborators and our partners. You're not simply a beneficiary of a programme. You're not simply someone who just has a story that you're having to deal with. You're a leader in your own right, and you can run nations as well as or in addition to running a household. I want you to hear: when you're ready to shout, don't let someone make you whisper. When you're ready to stand, don't let someone make you crawl, and when you're ready to soar, take your place because that is what we owe you as the older generation – to set the stage for you to have that space, and you are going to be the ones to lead us into the future."

Ta'Adhmeeka Beamon, The Office of the U.S. Global AIDS
Coordinator and Health/PEPFAR

FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

The UN Women-PEPFAR programme demonstrates how the voices of adolescent girls and young women can be elevated by bringing women's networks and campaigns into spaces of influence and connecting them to those that fund and make decisions about their access to HIV information and services.

For young women like Cynthia Wakuna from Cameroon, presenting at the International AIDS Conference led to new opportunities to exercise leadership in public settings, such as the Sexual Violence Research Initiative Forum 2022 in Cancún, Mexico and the International Adolescence and HIV workshop in Cape Town, South Africa. Other emerging leaders, such as Rahma Seleman Jumanne from Tanzania, have gone on to participate in regional events convened by the AWLN and UN-supported gatherings on HIV and sexual and reproductive health such as the UNITED! Leadership Summit.

Several women from the programme are looking ahead to claim their role and fully participate in upcoming national-level processes, such as the Global Fund Grant Cycle 7, to ensure that resources are allocated toward programming for adolescent girls and young women. HER Voice Fund also plans to mobilise and collaborate with participants from the programme to ensure these priorities are reflected in Concept Note submissions to the Global Fund.

HERSTORY IN THE MAKING:

MEET THE LEADERS CHAMPIONING CHANGE FOR WOMEN'S HEALTH AND RIGHTS

Cynthia Wakuna

Cynthia Wakuna is a young women and girls' rights activist, a HER Voice Fund Ambassador and the Programmes Director at Mother of Hope Cameroon. In 2022, Cynthia participated in the UN Women-PEPFAR programme to strengthen the leadership and voice of young women in the HIV response, speaking passionately on sexual reproductive health and rights at the AIDS 2022 Conference in Canada and High-Level Meeting in Tanzania.

What motivated you to step up and become a leader in your community?

I was greatly inspired by my mother. Growing up, I saw her as a very proactive, intelligent, brave, and resourceful woman. Being the last of three girls and very close to her, she would tell me stories of her childhood and how her parents preferred to educate her brothers over her and her sisters. She was not able to further her education beyond primary school and often felt that her life would have turned out better if she had the chance to continue her studies. She would often remind me to seize every opportunity to be educated and both she and my father did their utmost to put my sisters and I through school. Her stories triggered my interest in understanding why parents in my mother's days would prefer educating a boy over a girl. I felt this was wrong. I did not know what it was called (gender inequality), but I did know that girls must have the same opportunities and rights as boys.

I started activities related to HIV through an annual summer campaign called AIDS Free Holiday organized by the Ministry of Health. I went door-to-door educating the public on the importance of getting tested and taking treatment so that parents could live long and healthy lives for their children. We also sensitised communities against stigmatisation and the need for acceptance.

When I got to secondary school, I immediately joined the 'Gender Club' and the topics we discussed triggered my interest in gender equality issues. Through these conversations, I now had the terminology to describe what I instinctively



Photo credit: Cynthia Wakuna

knew was wrong in my mother's stories. I learned about concepts of gender and how gender inequalities manifested against girls. I read books, used the internet to learn more and shared this with my peers. I soon became President of the Gender Club. At the time, I didn't really know what leadership was - I just knew I had to be a voice for gender equality, and I wanted other girls to know that being educated was their right. I wanted them to know they could dream to be anything and actually achieve it.

When I left secondary school, our Gender Club Coordinator, who was also my history teacher, invited me to join her in starting an organization called Mother of Hope Cameroon (MOHCAM), where I became the Girls Programme Coordinator in 2012. I went to university to study gender/law and two years later became Programmes Director of MOHCAM, which is a position I am still proud to hold. In 2021, I became the Her Voice Fund Ambassador to Cameroon, through which I continue to advocate for the participation and representation of adolescent girls and young women in decision-making spaces and processes concerning their health.

How have you built confidence as a leader who advocates for the health and rights of adolescent girls and young women?

It is not enough to just want to be a 'voice' or a leader. Desire and passion is essential to get started on your leadership journey, but you must find ways to build your confidence. Confidence does not just mean your ability to stand before people and talk; it has a lot to do with the substance of what you say, the quality of your work and the skills you've mastered. What has worked for me is surrounding myself with people who motivate and inspire, people who can fuel my passion. Gaining new skills helped me excel, and reading books and articles meant I gained mastery over different topics.

Why do you feel having a mentor matters for young women who want to become leaders?

Mentorship has been instrumental in moulding my leadership skills. I have had several mentors at different stages of my life. My mentors were able to see qualities that I had not yet recognized in myself. They brought out the best in me.

Mentorship can help you stay on track with your leadership journey because there are times when you feel like you must be everywhere, and it's easy to lose a clear sense of direction. Because of the passion you have, you tend to want to do everything and meet every need without taking enough time to care for yourself. Some of us also have families of our own, and others have siblings and parents to care for. My mentors support me holistically, providing guidance beyond my career and professional choices. They also continue to support my personal growth and work-life-family balance. This kind of mentorship is so important for young women because there's often so much going on that stepping up and becoming a strong woman leader can feel daunting.

What were some of the benefits of participating in the UN Women-PEPFAR programme? Did you experience any challenges?

Being part of this programme has given me visibility and introduced me to a movement of young women around the world doing extraordinary things which is a source of continuous inspiration.

Through the feminist leadership training, I was able to sharpen my knowledge and skills on different approaches to sexual and reproductive

health and rights and HIV interventions for adolescent girls and young women. The training made me think about my leadership journey and to develop a plan for the future. Thinking of next steps is exciting but also scary. Working with established women leaders has positively impacted how I think about my future actions, priorities, new opportunities and professional life.

The High-Level Meeting on Championing the Priorities of Women and Girls in the HIV Response in Tanzania was a highlight of the programme. I was inspired and motivated by my peers and their assertiveness when speaking to power. There were truthful conversations about what it means for us to be feminist leaders, our impact, the key priorities for women and girls and how we can incorporate these insights into our work.

Intergenerational dialogues with established women leaders and other decision makers have influenced my work back in Cameroon. At MOHCAM, I've initiated new conversations with colleagues and partners and re-evaluated my actions at the community level. I'm also addressing new trends in HIV infection among adolescent girls and young women based on the gaps and priorities identified at the High-Level Meeting.

What advice would you give to the new generation of female leaders who want to speak up and claim their rights in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights and HIV?

Stay true to yourself. It is what will guide and keep you on track as you seek to be a powerful voice among many other voices. You must constantly remind yourself that you don't just speak for yourself, but you speak for thousands of adolescent girls and young women who are counting on you to represent them and advocate for their needs and rights.

It is important to be aware that the journey will not be smooth. You will knock on doors that will not open to you. Cultures, stereotypes and systems of power will work to keep you out of decision-making spaces or seek to silence your voice, but you must be resilient and constantly remind yourself of why you started this work in the first place. You must aim to build your capacity and gain mastery of your subject so that you remain a strong voice and leader who will not, and cannot, be ignored by others.

When it comes to ensuring there are more women leaders like yourselves advocating for the rights of adolescent girls and young women in the HIV response, what would be your message for organizations, actors and funders, such as UN Women, UNAIDS, PEPFAR, the Global Fund and others?

I would want to say this very loudly: please continue investing in the leadership of adolescent girls and young women as there is more than enough evidence that this investment comes back with multiple returns.

Please invest because, despite the work done so far, too many girls and young women continue to face discrimination and violence when making decisions about their lives and their health, especially reproductive health. Too many girls and young women report their first sexual experience to be rape. We have a long way to go to achieve gender equality.

I believe the full potential of adolescent girls and young women as trailblazing change makers has yet to be harnessed. We have so much more to offer and only your committed investment can unleash our power and ability.

ENDNOTES

CASE STUDY 1: OUR FUTURES, OUR VOICES

1. The 10-10-10 targets state that by 2025 less than 10% of countries should have punitive legal and policy environments that deny or limit access to services, less than 10% of people living with HIV and key populations will experience stigma and discrimination and less than 10% of women, girls, people living with HIV and key populations will experience gender inequality and violence.
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5. Gender at Work is an international feminist knowledge network and learning collaborative that works to end discrimination against women and build cultures of inclusion.
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