



POWER TO YOU(TH)

YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERSPECTIVES AND DECISION-MAKING REGARDING HARMFUL PRACTICES, SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND UNINTENDED PREGNANCY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY GHANA



Ministry of Foreign Affairs



KIT Royal
Tropical
Institute

AUTHORS

Design Health Consult Ltd:

- Dr John Kingsley Krugu
- Robert Asambobillah
- Azoteyine Sally Lariba
- Albert Apotele Nyaaba

KIT Royal Tropical Institute:

- Ophelia Chatterjee
- Irene de Vries

Harvest Foundation:

- Ayaba Millicent Nyandiba

PREFACE

KIT Royal Tropical Institute (KIT), in collaboration with in-country research partners, is pleased to present this executive summary of the Power to You(th) baseline study conducted in Ghana¹. This was one of seven such studies conducted for the Power to You(th) programme in the seven programme implementation countries, namely Ethiopia, Ghana, Indonesia, Kenya, Malawi, Senegal, and Uganda. Power to You(th) is a five-year programme (2021–2025) with a specific focus on harmful practices (such as female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) and child marriage), sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and unintended pregnancy. These are persistent ‘key issues’ on which insufficient progress has been made over the years in the participating countries.

Power to You(th) aims to ensure that young people (aged under 35) are meaningfully included in discussions and decisions, particularly those related to their SRHR. By increasing the participation of young people from a range of backgrounds and groups in political and civic space, the programme aims to improve youth-led and focused advocacy and accountability in relation to unintended pregnancy, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and harmful practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation/ cutting (FGM/C) in the seven focus countries.

The programme is funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and globally the programme is coordinated by three partners: Amref Flying Doctors, Rutgers and Gender Justice (Sonke). In Ghana, the Power to You(th) programme is implemented by Norsaac, in partnership with Youth Advocates Ghana (YAG), Ghana Alliance for Young People (Gh-Alliance) and Songtaba. The programme will be implemented in ten areas within five of Ghana’s sixteen regions. These five regions are the Upper East, Savannah, North-East, and Northern Regions, and Greater Accra.

¹ The full baseline study report is available here: <https://www.kit.nl/publication/power-to-youth-baseline-report-ghana/>.

“THEY DON’T LISTEN TO US” - YOUNG PEOPLE’S PERSPECTIVES AND DECISION-MAKING REGARDING HARMFUL PRACTICES, SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND UNINTENDED PREGNANCY

A desk review and mixed-methods baseline study were conducted to inform the Power to You(th) (PTY) programme implementation in Ghana. The baseline study analysed the perspectives of young people (15-24 years old) and explored their role in decision-making processes related to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), harmful practices and unintended pregnancy.

The study was conducted by a research team from Design Health Consult Ltd. and KIT Royal Tropical Institute in four out of the ten implementation areas of the PTY programme, namely **Tamale Metropolis** and **Kpandai district** in the Northern region (NR) and **Builsa South** and **Kassena Nankana West** in the Upper East region (UER). In addition, data were collected among young people engaged in the harmful practice related to ‘Kaya business’, and state actors in the **Greater Accra Metropolis** (GA).

The study design included a literature review, a quantitative survey carried out with adolescents and youth, and an online survey distributed to civil society organisation (CSO) and youth advocates. The qualitative component added focus group discussions with adolescents and youth; semi-structured and key informant interviews with social and state actors; and in-depth interviews with young people. Additionally, young people participated in photovoice research after being equipped with cameras and participating in group discussions based on photographs taken by them in their communities.

This study included 77 qualitative interviews/ FGDs and 18 photovoice activities, 503 adolescent and youth survey respondents, and 30 civic space survey respondents.

KEY BASELINE RESULTS FOR THE POWER TO YOU(TH) PROGRAMME IN KENYA

The baseline study suggests a mixed picture of youth knowledge, agency, and attitudes towards harmful practices, SGBV and unintended pregnancy, as well as large reserves of untapped potential among young people willing to act on these issues. On the one hand, young people felt subjectively well-informed about many SRHR topics, particularly in the Northern Region, and were disapproving of harmful practices like FGM/C (which is no longer common or accepted), child marriage and sexual violence. On the other hand, many forms of SGBV including child marriage were normalised, and hence severely underreported. Deeply rooted norms around gender and sexuality continue to restrict the agency and rights of all young people, particularly those such as Kayayei who are multiply burdened by poverty or other vulnerabilities. Conversations about rights are often viewed with suspicion by parents and authority figures, which is a challenge for civil society.

While young people have positive aspirations about their futures and increasingly express themselves on emerging social media and radio platforms, they felt demotivated by older people who view them as having limited capacity and motivation. Most young people did not feel comfortable speaking up, and were rarely involved in decision-making around Power to You(th) focus issues – particularly those far from the capital. While one in five young people engaged with CSOs, many felt this participation was of low quality. The critical role young people can and should take in tackling Power to You(th) focus issues is therefore undermined by a lack of voice/agency, a lack of knowledge, and a lack of functioning institutional structures and accountability mechanisms.

Women and girls were particularly excluded from action and decision spaces. Their agency in decisions about whether and when to marry and have children was restricted, partly due to stigmas around pregnancies occurring outside of marriage, and SGBV. Boys felt huge pressure to live up to norms around masculinity. Young people who do speak out require far more support from authorities such as the police and chiefs, who too often fail to protect young people's rights. Informal community-based mechanisms are not delivering justice for young people, while police often fail to follow up on cases.

A healthy civic space and media environment is necessary for constructive public conversations which hold duty-bearers accountable on these issues. Many CSOs described Ghana as an open society where they can speak out on key issues, and work positively with the government. There were some exceptions like LGBTQI+ rights and comprehensive sexuality education (CSE). Freedom of press was dependent on the issues being discussed, and some conversations have been hijacked by anti-rights groups. Social media is becoming increasingly important for lobbying and advocacy, and interactions with the public on these platforms (as well as television and radio) were viewed as constructive. CSOs face challenges around coordination, finances and dialogue with officials and communities, but they continue to find ways to build these dialogues and defend the rights of young people, while respecting the culture and values of communities with which they work.

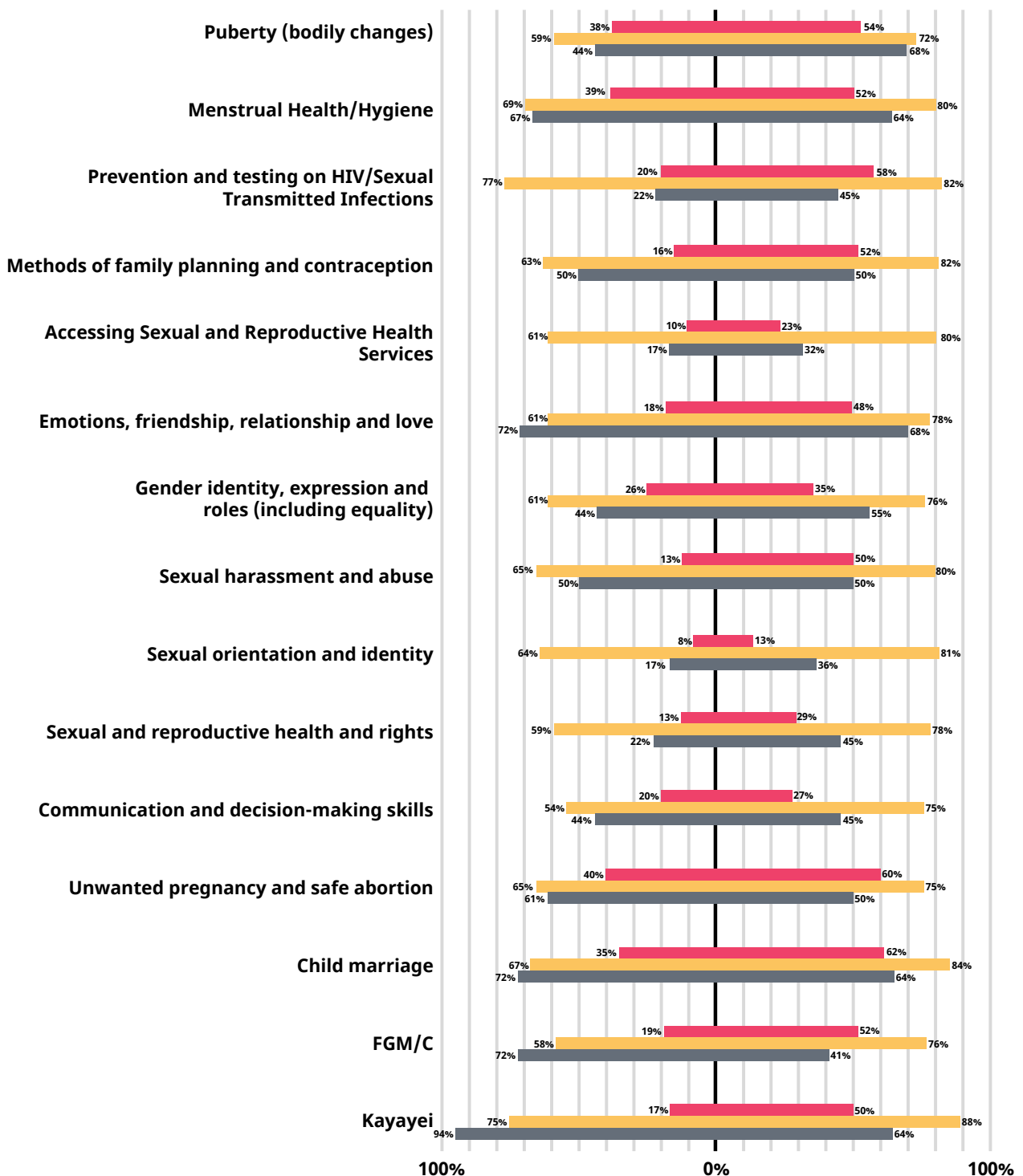
YOUNG PEOPLE'S KNOWLEDGE AND SUPPORT

Despite lower educational status, Northern Region respondents felt more informed about SRHR topics than those in other regions; however, feeling informed is subjective and does not necessarily prevent young people from holding misconceptions.

Respondents who felt averagely or very informed about:

■ Upper east
 ■ Northern Region
 ■ Greater Accra

Adolescent | Youth



Overall, respondents in the NR reported feeling much more informed across all SRHR topics than those in other regions, with over 60% stating that they felt averagely or very informed about each individual topic. This appears to be partly related to the higher average age of respondents in the NR, as adolescents (aged 15–19) in all regions reported being much less informed than youth (aged 20–24). This is a subjective measure of how informed individuals feel and may not reflect (or even closely relate to) full or accurate knowledge of these topics. For example, the qualitative data indicate fairly widespread misconceptions about contraception, with many respondents falsely believing that hormonal contraception can cause infertility.

Mothers, followed by friends and teachers, were seen as the preferred and main source of information and support for access to SRH services.

Mothers were by far the most preferred source of information (mentioned by 41%), followed by friends (18%) and teachers (13%). Fathers were the most common second preferred source (21%). Between half and three quarters of those whose first preference for SRHR information source was their mother, schoolteacher or friends also listed this as their main source of information, suggesting alignment between young people's wishes and reality. Though respondents generally did not view media channels as main or preferred sources of information, when asked which platforms they did prefer to get information on Power to You(th) topics through, there was a strong preference for television and radio, with WhatsApp and Facebook also mentioned by some. Newer social media platforms such as TikTok, Telegram and Instagram were very rarely mentioned.

While FGM/C was no longer common or accepted, child marriage, SGBV and unintended pregnancies were recognised as common and interlinked.

- **Child marriage** was widely acknowledged as a common, harmful and highly gendered practice driven by poverty and closely related to unintended and teenage pregnancy. Parents often encourage or pressure their daughters into marriages and/or sexual relationships (which often led to marriages) with older, wealthier men. These relationships were viewed as a means of improving a family's financial security.
- **SGBV** was common and, although generally disapproved of, a certain level of normalisation was found, leading to low levels of reporting and conviction. *"Sexual and gender-based violence is something that goes on everywhere. We people experience it not just in their homes, people experience it in the office, some people are abused sexually at other different places, so it is a common thing that people do without even knowing that it is a crime, and they think that it is their right to do it."* (SSI, social welfare officer, Kpandai, NR)
- About a third of the respondents in the NR and one in five in the UER knew someone who had been sexually abused. Poverty was seen as one of the main driving factors of SGBV, while girls were regularly accused of and stigmatised for being responsible for the act. *"It also the fault of the girls."* (FGD with females, 15–19 years, KNW, UER)
- Parental poverty, school policies and tradition were seen as causes of unintended pregnancy. Knowledge of modern methods of contraception was higher in the NR than elsewhere (87% compared to about 50%), with deeply rooted beliefs in the

value of abstaining from sex outside marriage.

Women engaged in 'Kaya business' in Accra live a tough life in poverty with few opportunities.

The high poverty levels in the Northern parts of Ghana, namely, the Upper West, Upper East, Northeast, Northern and Savannah regions, compel girls and women to migrate to the southern parts, mainly to the capital cities like Accra and Kumasi, to engage in what is known locally as 'Kaya business'. This refers to the act of carrying loads on the head for a fee, and the women who are engaged in this activity are called Kayayei. Kayayei are extremely vulnerable to SGBV and have little agency to protect themselves or report crimes. Poverty and limited opportunities, including running away from child or forced marriages, were seen as the main driving factors.

What stood out: Many young people do not speak out against harmful practices because they feel that elders would not listen to their concerns. Although some participants indicated that young people expressed themselves on social media and radio, state actors view youth groups as having limited capacity, little comprehensive knowledge on issues and little motivation.

YOUNG PEOPLE'S AGENCY AND MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT

"They don't listen to us"

Findings show that young people believe in the future and have dreams and aspirations, but little agency in achieving them, mainly due to a lack of financial support. About half of the young people surveyed felt they could express opinions about relationships, love, puberty and pregnancy in their community. This was higher in the UER than in other regions. Most adolescents and youth feel uncomfortable expressing opinions about harmful practices, unintended pregnancy and SGBV, have few spaces (such as community meetings) to discuss, and are rarely involved in decision-making around these issues.

"Yes, it would have been good for us to voice out our concerns but they will not listen to us. They will not consider our concerns as anything." (FGD with males, 15–19 years, Tamale Metro, UER)

The majority of young people felt that community activities in which they participated were youth-led, but very few felt that their engagement was meaningful.

Less than 15% of surveyed youth in all regions felt that opinion leaders' welcome young adults and encourage them to get involved in roles that interest them. Most (71%) felt that activities they participated in were youth-led, but only 15% felt that their engagement was meaningful.

Participation of young people in activities or actions to prevent harmful practices, SGBV and unintended pregnancy was generally low:

- Few (11%) surveyed young people had participated in activities to prevent **child marriage**, most commonly 'educating girls about the importance of staying in school' and 'rallying the wider community to stand up for girls' rights.'
- Only 14% had participated in community activities to prevent **SGBV**, mostly educating girls on their rights and speaking out about the risks and realities of SGBV.
- Slightly more (23%) had participated in activities to prevent **unintended pregnancy**, primarily focused on education about rights and awareness-raising about family planning.

Kayayei do not feel involved in or helped by activities that should support them.

Qualitative data show that CSOs are working to support young Kayayei. However, some Kayayei participants were not optimistic about such support. They explained that organisations promised to help them but ultimately did nothing. Some participants suggested that the most effective way to tackle the practice was to create employment opportunities in the north of Ghana, to reduce young people's need to leave these regions to find work in the large cities.

One in five adolescents and youth respondents engage with CSOs, but the quality of their participation was rated as low.

In the UER, more females (41%) than males (9%) were engaged with CSOs, while in the NR more males (27%) than females (8%) were. The majority of these were either involved in youth-led organisations (53%) or faith-based organisations (23%). The most common activity in which young people participated was awareness-raising in the community (79%), while a minority engaged in media and campaigning (10%). However, young people rated the quality of their participation in such activities as low, especially in the Northern region. 'Participation' meant primarily 'being informed', while only a small minority felt they were involved in decision-making processes

However, CSOs offer great potential for meaningfully engaging young people

CSO-affiliated individuals involved in lobbying and/or advocacy that completed the civic space survey rated their participation as good and meaningful. They were involved at various levels and mostly engaged in community awareness-raising (93%), provision of training/sensitisation workshops (82%), campaigning using media (79%) and participation in public debates (57%).

"I've been on several platforms with such young people who are now leading or who have now even gone into politics, and for most of those people they started working with CSOs, either volunteering or being engaged in those activities. So, I think that the CSO space has created, or has nurtured that level of leadership when it comes to youth. So, youth leadership has really been nurtured by CSOs." (SSI, female youth advocate)

The critical role young people can take in tackling Power to You(th) focus issues was broadly recognised; however, they are challenged by a lack of voice/agency, a lack of knowledge and a lack of functioning institutional structures and accountability mechanisms.

What stood out: The finding suggests that young people in the regions and districts furthest from the national capital are hardly engaged in policymaking. The few young people who get the opportunity to attend such fora do not see their concerns incorporated into policies.

(ENABLING) ENVIRONMENT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE'S RIGHTS AND ADDRESSING HARMFUL PRACTICES, SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND UNINTENDED PREGNANCY

Deeply rooted cultural and religious norms define traditional roles and behaviour and continue to shape young people's responses to harmful practices.

Many social norms inhibited the realisation of (young) women's rights. For example, while most participants indicated that forced marriages had become less common, women still lacked meaningful alternatives to marriage, particularly if they became pregnant. Those who did not marry were viewed as bringing shame on their family and were often disowned, which acted as an informal social mechanism through which women and girls were strongly pressured into unsatisfactory marriages. Norms around masculinity also place enormous responsibilities on young men to prove their 'manliness' by working hard and earning income to support the family.

Traditional authorities were seen as important stakeholders in the prevention of harmful practices; however, victims rarely get justice through the informal reporting mechanisms.

For the prevention of harmful practices, participants mentioned the importance of chiefs, Queen Mothers, community elders, religious leaders and Assembly members. However, they were not always positive about their involvement. For example, it was mentioned that most cases of abuse were reported to the chief's palace rather than the police (if they were reported at all), and that victims rarely got justice through this informal reporting mechanism. Some participants mentioned that even when young men raped girls by drugging them, chiefs preferred to address these crimes in the palace instead of reporting them to the police. Other participants spoke of being discouraged from reporting abuse to the police because they knew nothing would be done.

"The thing is if they hear of it, they will be saying that you this girl you can even do it, you are telling lies in order to get something to cover up something. Mostly when they hear their stories that is what they normally say. The man cannot force a girl to have sex with her if the girl doesn't go to the man that cannot happen." (Photovoice with young women, 15–19 years, KNW, UER)

Traditional leaders often either do not see the fight against harmful practices as part of their role, view these practices as cultural or traditional (therefore not of great concern), or lack the capacity or influence to address them. When they do address them, sometimes they do so through restrictive by-laws, such as banning night-time music and dance events, that are no long-term or rights-based solutions to these issues.

Though multiple laws and policies to protect youth rights exist, implementation remains a challenge at the local level where by-laws are often more respected.

Policy illiteracy, the poor use of modern communication channels, resource constraints, and cultural norms that discourage reporting of rights violations were mentioned as the main challenges in enforcing laws and policies. Some participants felt that harmful practices have not been prioritised by successive governments, that international treaties are not operationalised, and that political will to protect youth rights is often weak. Private actors and external funding were seen as instrumental in the public education on government policies and policy reviews.

What stood out: A perception that children's rights advocates are overly emphasising the issue of children's rights and making it difficult for parents to 'correct' their children can constitute a barrier to the realisation of these rights. As a result, children's rights advocates can be seen as promoting poor discipline and may not gain the community's support.

CIVIC SPACE AND ROLE OF MEDIA

Study participants view Ghana as an open society where different members of civil society can speak about and advocate on (most) SRHR issues and interact positively with the government, with some notable exceptions on key issues.

Some key issues were considered very sensitive in the national context. The most prominent was LGBTQI+ rights, with a recent clampdown on CSOs supporting these. In addition, comprehensive sexuality education (CSE)—particularly around family planning—was widely associated with promoting promiscuity among young people. Many participants mentioned close working relationships between government, media and civil society actors, based on perceived respectability, and, often, personal relationships between individuals. While this can improve collaboration, some suggested it also makes CSOs less willing to be critical of the government and media houses (and the media less willing to criticise the government), for fear of risking their insider positions and positive social standing.

With regard to the individual core components of civic space, participants expressed a rather positive perception:

- Study participants are generally positive about the **freedom of information and expression**, again with exception of some sensitive issues.
- With regard to the **freedom of assembly and association**, respondents reported the ability to communicate, participate, and organise for human rights. However, restrictions such as: costs and requirements for authorisations; violence, repression and policing; and criminalisation and punishment of certain activities were also mentioned.
- **Security of civil society** was generally rated as fairly to very safe. Though respondents generally feel CSOs, journalists and activists are safe in the national context, worrisome cases of journalists being threatened or physically attacked for criticising the government do also exist.
- When asked about existing government mechanisms/initiatives that provide **financial support** to organisations working on SRHR, most respondents say these do not exist or they are not aware of them. It was mentioned that the policy environment for CSOs could be improved.

Inequity in dialogue & consultation with the government

CSO advocates state they are actively involved in decision-making or approached by the government for meaningful consultation on policies relating to PtY issues. However, not all groups are actively involved. When asked whether any specific groups were discriminated against and/or excluded from government dialogue, eight respondents indicated people with disabilities, while seven indicated youth groups. Six selected indigenous/minority groups, while five indicated women's rights organisations. Three mentioned the LGBTQI+ community in the comment space.

Freedom of press is dependent on the issues being discussed and the internal policies of media houses.

Meaning that if an issue was not seen as political or sensitive, then discussion would be openly supported. However, sensitive issues are avoided in the media and by media houses, although this was not seen as censorship even by some CSO informants. Media support for Power to You(th) core issues varies and may be positive or negative depending on the context. Several participants discussed how the media could be an ally in SRHR issues, but it could also be an enemy - for example when the conversation around CSE was hijacked by anti-rights messaging, and became a discussion about LGBTQI+ rights and promiscuity. Training could increase mutual understanding and support:

“So the media is a powerful force, you know, because lots of people listen to the media, lots of people want the opinions of the media. And so, I think that they do have a role to play. So we can work in partnership with them. So once we take the media as an ally, then they’ll be willing to promote our core values, once we take them as an ally between, train them to know what we are doing and why we are doing it, then that makes it easier to work with them towards the achievement of our goals, so I think that they are a powerful tool.” (IDI, CSO representative, Accra)

Social media, television and radio were seen as the most influential media platforms.

Advocates discuss a wide variety of SRH topics on (social) media and rate interactions with the public on media platforms/channels as (very) constructive.

What stood out: Resource constraints are the main challenge facing the decentralised agencies responsible for implementing government policies. Most of the time, these agencies leverage projects of CSOs to enforce these policies and laws. There is a need for CSOs to move beyond supporting decentralised agencies with direct resources to enable young people to demand accountability and increase resource allocations to decentralised agencies.

RECOMMENDATIONS PER PATHWAY

Pathway 1. Young people demand accountability and responsiveness on harmful practices, SGBV and unintended pregnancy

- Young people's views are often not respected by older people, partly because they cannot speak in a way that elders find convincing. **Empowering young people with comprehensive knowledge and skills, including how to use data to make an argument** on issues affecting them, is highly recommended.
- **Create sustainable fora to foster intergenerational dialogue** in a way that disrupts the usual power dynamic where older and higher-status community members speak while younger people listen. Youth-led participatory research methods can assist in this, and it is recommended that suitable participatory techniques be explored and used.
- The results show that FGM/C does not seem to be a harmful practice of major concern in Ghana. Such a conclusion could be erroneous, given that the practice of FGM/C in Ghana is limited to specific localities, none of which were part of the study areas of this work. Therefore, to gain a complete picture of FGM/C as a harmful practice in Ghana, we recommend a **snapshot study in the FGM/C endemic localities** (in the Upper West and Upper East regions) for a more informed conclusion on FGM/C.

Pathway 2: CSOs amplify young people's voices to claim, protect and expand civic space

- Support youth groups to engage their respective District Assemblies and Members of Parliament to **demand their participation in developing policies on issues affecting them**.
- Social media and community radio are potent tools for Ghana's Power to You(th) programme. Therefore, we recommend that the programme **engage communication experts to develop a (social) media communication strategy** and provide guidance and advice on using social media tools to address harmful practices. In addition, a strategy should be developed on approaching sensitive topics, such as CSE and LGBTQI+ rights within the Ghanaian media and policy space. Implementation of such a strategy could be accompanied by an operational study to contribute to the discourse on how to deal with opposition to sensitive SRHR topics across sub-Saharan Africa.
- **Further research** is necessary to enable those currently being left behind to secure digital dividends and help to **reduce digital inequalities by investing in digital literacy**. It is vital that the development of soft skills—such as social communication and digital literacy—is appropriately addressed to ensure the digital inclusion of all youth.

Pathway 3: Societal actors support and promote youth rights and progressive social norms and attitudes to youth rights.

- Work directly with a range of stakeholders, from healthcare workers and teachers to CSOs and community leaders, to **improve understanding of the ineffectiveness of abstinence-only messaging and address myths** around

SGBV such as victim-blaming. In addition the incorrect beliefs that the use of hormonal contraceptives leads to infertility and that expanding young people's access to contraception promotes sexual promiscuity should be countered. It is recommended that a range of interventions aimed at changing such norms be tailored to different types of societal actors.

- The **criminal justice system** must be engaged to have a **more responsive attitude to harmful practices and abuses**.
- Engage with social protection institutions, especially the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, to **develop a clear policy on how to address the practice of Kaya business** in Ghana. Skills training and start-up capital to support young Kayayei to undertake more dignified and sustainable income-earning activities could be part of that.

Pathway 4. State actors improve policymaking, budgeting and implementation at the local, national, regional and global levels on harmful practices, SGBV and unintended pregnancy

- The government and CSOs should direct efforts at **supporting traditional authorities to enforce rights-based by-laws** aimed at addressing harmful practices.
- Advocacy efforts should be directed at ensuring the **operationalisation of the Domestic Violence Fund**, to provide the resources needed to support SGBV victims (for example, in arranging medical examinations to secure vital time-sensitive evidence often required in cases of rape and intimate partner violence).

KIT Royal Tropical Institute
P.O. Box 95001
1090 HA Amsterdam
The Netherlands

Visiting Address
Mauritskade 64
1092 AD Amsterdam
The Netherlands

www.kit.nl
info@kit.nl
T: +31 (0)20 56 88 711



KIT Royal
Tropical
Institute